



“Any Time, Any Place”: The Myth of Universal Access and the Semiprivate Space of Online Education

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Abstract

The rhetoric surrounding distance education emphasizes that it allows students to complete courses in an abstract “any time,” and thus improves access to higher education. This essay critiques that discourse and argues that teachers and scholars need to build critical consideration of students’ lived negotiations of time into the work of online courses. Social media provide a useful site for this work: students can mark the time of the course and critically reflect on their experience of the course’s location in public or private space. Using Ellen Rooney’s concept of the semiprivate, the essay theorizes how students in one first-year composition course described, on social media, the time and space of the online course. While the policy discourse surrounding online education imagines that its neutral relationship to time is a way to create universal access to higher education, the concept of the semiprivate emphasizes costs and barriers that are generated as students struggle to fit online courses into the specific realities of their lives.

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1. Introduction

Mainstream policy writing often presents online education as crucial to improving access to higher education. The [Lumina Foundation \(2013, p. 2–5\)](#), for example, argued that the United States has a social and economic imperative to increase the percentage of American adults with a college degree. Online courses are a key part of this strategy, because their flexibility seems to make it possible for more people to attend college. Indeed, 71% of university leaders said online learning was part of their plan to improve access ([NASULGC & Sloan National Commission on Online Learning, 2007, p. 6](#)). In one good example of this discourse, from a Lumina-funded study, the [Miller Center and Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges \(2010\)](#) wrote:

A person who holds a job while going to college will have difficulty attending classes scheduled at three different times during the day. Some colleges are developing blocks of required courses from, say, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. in the evening [. . .] Others are putting the courses online to be accessed when students are not at their jobs. (p. 16)

Because they are unscheduled, online courses become a way of increasing student autonomy—an idea that is, as [Bill Anderson \(2006, p. 108–9\)](#) noted, deeply embedded in the rhetoric of distance education. In the words of the [Aspen](#)

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Institute's (2014) Report on Learners and the Internet, we must "redesign learning networks to empower learners to learn any time, any place and at any pace" (p. 45).

Yet it would be difficult to argue that online courses are succeeding at this lofty task of "empower[ing] learners," despite laudable efforts by faculty and institutions. Patricia Webb Boyd (2008) and Craig Stroupe (2003) both took up the question of why students and faculty are often dissatisfied with the interactions in online courses specifically designed to promote engagement and community. More broadly, recent large-scale studies of community college students have revealed that students in online courses are less likely to complete courses taken online and earn lower grades when they do.¹ For students at non-elite universities—exactly the population who must gain access to education in the interest of Lumina's goal—online courses seem to be less effective than face-to-face instruction. As universities have devoted resources to improving and assessing quality in online courses, this disappointment is increasingly attributed to a lack of discipline on the part of students (Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 17–18).

This essay argues that one problem facing distance education is precisely the discourse of universal access. When the Miller Center and the AGB (2010) imagined that students would take online courses when they "are not at their jobs" (p. 16), they situated distance education in a time and space that can be described only negatively, when and where it will not take place. This description works through a double abstraction: It avoids positioning the course in any scheduled, particular time, and it also avoids locating the course in social space—in a public sphere of work or civic discourse or in a private sphere of the home. With these abstractions, it becomes possible to imagine that anyone and everyone have access to such a course. Every real student, however, will have to fit the course into his or her actual, lived experience, engaging in an ongoing negotiation between the parts of their lives as they decide what specific times they will use for their online coursework, and what else they will not do (work, socialize, engage with family, relax, sleep) during that time. The discourse of universal access renders invisible that private process by which students integrate the course into their specific lives. We need to engage the difficulties and costs of making online courses work in students' lives—the struggle to figure out when they will complete work for their course, amidst all the other demands on their time and energies, and what relationship it has to the other parts of their experience.

Social media provide a useful site where such work can take place within the online course. This essay presents the results of a case study in the use of social media in online first-year composition at a public, regional university serving largely working, first-generation students. I asked students in the second semester of a first-year composition course to participate in a fairly free-form Twitter assignment that required six tweets per student per week. My initial goal was simply to encourage community and engagement with the course, but a more significant effect emerged: Students shaped their social media posts to be useful to themselves, by using Twitter to document the real, hard-won time occupied by the course and to give it a specific social space. In doing so, they implicitly rebuked the idea that they were undisciplined. Their challenges in finding time for the course derived, instead, from its dislocation: It did not have a clear relationship to their lives, and they used social media to carve out a socially real time and place for it. Twitter proved to be a particularly good tool for this work, because, like the online course, its relationship to social space, to the public and the private, is ambiguous: By posting to Twitter and by taking an online course, are they participating in public discourse? Should they form friendships and "private" bonds with their online classmates? Is doing so just another form of the over-sharing of private information that plagues social media? Students worked through these questions as they used Twitter and reflected on their social media practice.

Teacher-scholars of first-year composition are well positioned to help the distance learning community dismantle the discourse of universal access. Recent scholarship on online composition often connects to the tradition of ecological composition theory, which sees student writers as inextricably embedded in multiple structures, spaces, and times. Jeanne Marie Rose (2011), for example, argued for "fostering *temporal awareness*" in students by asking them reflectively to situate "individual time resources within larger sociocultural contexts" (p. 47). Bill Anderson (2006), Gillam and Shannon (2013), Michelle Comstock (2004), and Dorothy Lander (2005) all resisted seeing the online course as a space of disembodied information transfer and instead analyze how students invoke their embodied experience during

¹ In their study of over 22,000 students at 34 Washington community colleges, Di Xu and Shanna Smith Jaggars (2013, p. 55) found that taking a course online reduced course persistence by 7% and average final grades by .3 points on a 4.0 scale. These findings are consistent with Xu and Jaggars' 2011 research on 24,000 students in math and English courses at Virginia community colleges, where they found, for example, substantially higher attrition in gateway courses when taken online versus face-to-face: online courses showed 9% higher attrition in English and 13% in math. These findings have disrupted a dominant view that there is "no significant difference" in outcomes for online versus face-to-face courses (Xu and Jaggars, 2011, p. 360–361).

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