# Postpedagogy and Web Writing

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## Abstract

Collaborative digital tools, online communities, and the evolution of literacy create opportunities in which writing for an English class and writing for the "real" world no longer have to be two separate activities. Seizing such opportunities requires rethinking the desire to teach writing—a move toward what has been termed postpedagogy. We align the interactive and collaborative affordances of web writing with a postpedagogical model of learning focused on inventive practices grounded in *kairotic* interactions. We also detail our candid experiences working with students who are writing for real world audiences, as well as the productive risks and anxieties such an approach produces.
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"College Writing might not care that both the production and reception sites for texts are changing so rapidly, but the rest of the world does" (Sirc, 2010, p. 69)

"Our most egregious crime is the insistence on dumbing down the complicated process of composition to a scrupulously teachable method, reducing the roles of chance and the imagination in the production of textual knowledge" (Sirc, 2012, p. 512)

In this article, we provide both a rationale for and document our experiences with upper-division and first-year composition courses structured around web writing.[1] The exigence for our approach stems from both of Sirc's theses: how rhetoric and composition has underestimated the extent to which technological innovation transforms writing, and still succumbs to the temptation to reduce writing to a set of simple rules and procedures. Sirc echoed Collin Brooke's (2009) fear that writing instruction will grow increasingly irrelevant in the coming decade if it does not attune itself to the kinds of writing people are doing in the real world. We find particularly compelling Brooke's warning that "our disciplinary insistence upon the printed page, if it persists unchecked, will slowly bring us out of step with our students, our institutions, and the broader culture of which we are a part" (p. 23). Bringing the composition classroom into step is not merely a matter of grafting new technology onto outmoded methods; rather, it requires we attend to how new technologies engender new approaches to teaching.

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[1] We use the term "web writing" because it covers a variety of online writing practices, from blogging, to discussion forums, to social networks like Facebook and Twitter, to whatever will come next. Over the seven-year history of this approach, most of the writing our students have done could safely be described as blogging. Recently, given the dearth of comments on many blogs, we have turned to social networking sites and established web forums.

The arrival of new technologies, then, exacerbates the more fundamental, and likely more controversial, problem that Sirc (2012) identified, that "teaching writing is impossible" (p. 508). Writing is an elusive, complex practice, not the stilted activity codified by so many textbooks. The failures documented in *Academically Adrift* (2011) suggest to us, in our darker moments, that Brooke's warning might already have come to pass.[2] We were inspired by the enthusiasm our students had for the diverse forms of writing we were doing online, and thus developed a course dedicated to web writing.[3] Web writing for us means participating in a community of similarly motivated writers engaging in a variety of writing practices. We outline a highly participatory form of engagement that encourages students to recognize, anticipate, and even contribute to emerging *kairotic* moments through reading, reflection, revision, and (above all) constant writing. The approach explicated in the second half of this essay required students in both first-year composition and upper-division expository writing classes to post 1,000 words of public writing a week. They examine their web writing and that of their peers during in-class workshops, cultivating a critical sense for the kinds of choices available to writers. Finally, they compose several longer pieces at key intervals throughout the semester that reflect upon their writing and the writing practices of their chosen Internet community. The goals of our web writing class are to make students write as much as possible while making that online writing the main topic of inquiry. To this extent, we agree with Sirc's assessment of the problem ("screw teachability" and "linear reproducibility"), but not necessarily his solution (2012, p. 513, p. 517).[4] He described his position in the classroom as one who has "mastered" an art (2012, p. 516), and emphasized the importance of exposing students to "genius writing" (2012, p. 516). We are less comfortable with claims to mastery or genius; this is the basis of our explication of postpedagogy.

Our solution of this problem draws more on the ecological work of Marilyn Cooper (2010), especially her recent essay "Being Linked to the Matrix." Cooper (2010) surveyed the extent to which many disciplines are developing a networked metaphysics, predicating existence upon participation in a network. Cooper called upon composition to consider how such a participatory theory could impact writing instruction. Cooper's suspicions parallel those of Sirc; she cited the New London Group (1996), noting that:

> . .as Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger have pointed out, teaching a skill is not simply a matter of detailing rules, procedures, and strategies. The direct transmission model of teaching remains influential in writing pedagogy and can lead teachers to overvalue "systematic, analytic, and conscious understanding" and undervalue practice. (New London Group, p. 27)

She further "understand[s] the acquisition of writing skills as a matter of gradual attunement of movement and perception that comes dominantly through practice, a lot of playing around with stuff" (Cooper, 2010, p. 28). She drew upon the New London Group's manifesto that "overt instruction does not imply direct transmission, drills, and rote memorization" (1996, p. 33). Our approach to webwriting is based upon a postpedagogical emphasis on play and practice, employing a workshop model that exposes students to the range of choices writers make when responding to and engaging with audiences.

Cooper advocated an approach to writing instruction built around the concept of "design":

> Writers are never separate from the rhetorical situation in which they write. They do not study the situation as something apart from them and create in a vacuum a text that will change the situation; instead, they fully engage in the situation and respond to it. Anne Wysocki has argued that because a design approach to creating communications 'has been tied to the development of useful (instead of readable) objects, it tends to foster a more concrete sense of audience, purpose, and context' and because designers tend to experiment to find what works, 'by exploring and testing possibilities, they are more likely to develop what fits.' (2010, p. 69)

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[2] Arum and Roksa (2011) identified a number of causes for the limited learning demonstrated by the majority of students in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills (p. 36). They cite under-prepared and overworked students, faculty driven by increasing research expectations, and administration operating according to a business model. We believe part of the problem stems from a disconnect between writing pedagogy and students' lived experiences.

[3] This course was a follow to the successful course documented in Rivers, Weber, and Santos (2009). That course used forums dedicated to a single class theme, the course outlined below ambitiously expands the scope of that project.

[4] Nor do we share his suspicion towards peer review. Below, we argue that peer review can play a central role in the development of a critical apparatus that students can bring to bear on their own writing.