Meshing Digital & Academic Identities in Basic Writing Classrooms

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Leary describes an anthologizing assignment that involves collecting and arranging thematically related texts. Students also compose introductions for a complete class-generated publication. The author concludes that this form of "macrocomposition" allows basic writers to participate in discourse about the components of good writing and helps them assert social and literary agency normally reserved for published writers.

Edward Tufte, theorist of information design, argues that the citizens who thrive best in information-thick worlds are those who possess "everyday capacities to select, edit, single out, structure, highlight, group, pair, merge, harmonize, synthesize . . . winnow the wheat from the chafe, and separate the sheep from the goats" (50).

Through their experiences as users of the Web, many students enrolled in basic writing classes have already developed these capacities. The average competent Web user is a content curator, an editor, an aggregator, a recontextualist, a retweeter, and a remediator (Keen 116). Those who experiment with Web development frequently patch together code from existing programs and tweak it for their own purposes (Nuwere and Chanoff 114). Twitter users can recirculate ("retweet") original twitter messages. Users of the Web tool *Anthologize* collate other people's blog posts into thematic tables of contents. Members of the website *Pinterest* create online visual collections gathered from their Web navigations and the collections of their fellow members.

Students in basic writing classrooms undeniably need to become proficient in writing "from scratch," with letters and words and sentences. However, they also need to continue honing their capacities for "macrocomposition" – a form of writing in which chunks of text are copied and moved into a different context or a new document – because stewardship of other

people's writing has become a "basic skill" on the Web. In her 2004 CCCC Chair's address Kathleen Blake Yancey points out that many digital compositions are composed *not only in words* but also in audio, video, and visual images (298). It is important for teachers of basic writing to understand an additional point: that when digital composers do happen to compose only in words, they often compose *not only in their own words*. Web users thrive by collecting, revising, and recirculating work that they themselves have created and works composed by others.

In this essay, I argue that steering students away from the revision of other people's texts "needlessly limits individuals who have developed expressive identities in a digital age" (Gleason). More than two decades ago, Glynda Hull and Mike Rose asked for reconsideration of basic writers' appropriation strategies (144-152). Yet today, despite endorsement by Hull, Rose, Rebecca Moore Howard, and Mary Minock, among others, the assembly of other people's work is seen, *at best*, as a useful preliminary stage in a writer's process (Howard 788). It remains marginalized because of lingering concerns about voice and originality, and because of a print-era ambivalence about the value of editing.

My definition of macrocomposition departs only slightly from Howard's definition of "patchwriting," which involves "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes" (Howard 788). Macrocomposition can be accomplished by mining one's own writing, as in the case of an ePortfolio, or by collecting and editing other people's writing, as in the case of an anthology. The terminological shift from "patchwriting" to "macrocomposition" indicates a new understanding that, in digital realms, assembling the work of others ought no longer to be viewed as a means to an end, or as "a preliminary stage" for developing writers, but as an end in itself.

Previous basic writing scholarship has examined the implications of Web literacies for the basic writing classroom. Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark detail the benefits of incorporating digital literacies into the basic writing classroom. They offer ePortfolios as an example of "an ideal pedagogical tool for engaging basic writers and teaching them to merge Web 2.0 digital literacies and multimodal composing strategies at this critical juncture of digital and traditional writing" (33). Arguing that instructors can help students move more fluidly between digital realms and academic environments, Klages and Clark describe their focus on ePortfolios as digital tools that frequently facilitate collection and linkage.

Unfortunately, when digital literacies have been embraced in basic writing classrooms, they have only been selectively embraced in ways that do not fully acknowledge realities of writing and editing on the Web. ePortfolios, as attuned as they are to digital rhetorics, do not seriously challenge our understanding of "what counts as writing" in the 21st century (Devoss and Porter 182). As Klages and Clark describe them, ePortfolios are composed only of one's own work, not the work of others. ePortfolios, which require that basic writing students "start from scratch" with a blank piece of paper at the beginning of the semester and work their way up to macrocomposition by the end of the semester, remain somewhat aligned with a linear narrative of writing ability.

Anne Del Principe argues that a large percentage of basic writing curricula adhere to a linear narrative of composition, which, unsubstantiated by research, proposes that students must first master the arrangement of the smaller granules – like words and sentences – before moving up to paragraphs and then essays. Del Principe writes:

The linear narrative of writing ability is a story of how writers learn; it goes like this: individual writers begin to write by marking letters, then words, then phrases, then

sentences, and then small compositions down on paper. Once writers can write sentences

and small compositions correctly, they can move on to more complex skills, such as

paragraphing. Having mastered paragraphing, they can move on to writing descriptions

and personal narratives. Then, slowly but surely, they can make their way to analysis and

research. In this narrative, abilities are acquired sequentially, in what is believed to be a

logical, building-block order. Abilities build on preceding abilities, the simpler coming

first, the more complex following. (65)

This skills-based model of writing development has also been described by Mike Rose, who

explains that "[P]owerful – and limiting – assumptions about language, learning, and cognition

drive such a curriculum, although they might not be articulated" (128).   According to Rose,

curricula based on the linear model assume that students in basic writing classes:

[N]eed to go back to linguistic square one, building skills slowly through the elements of

grammar. Simple reading and writing assignments won't overly tax [basic writing

students'] limited abilit[ies] and will allow a concentration on correcting linguistic error.

Complex, demanding work and big ideas—college work—should be put on hold until

[they] master the basics. (128)

Macrocomposition, I argue, is the sort of complex, demanding work that basic writing students

can begin to engage in from the first day of their basic writing courses, but this will require large

changes in the way that English Departments understand basic writing.

Working as an adjunct instructor, I have seen how the linear narrative plays out in

developmental writing courses at the City University of New York. Two tests frame the course

that I taught. At midterm, students must pass a test on parts of speech and types of sentences. For

the final exam, students write a paragraph in the descriptive mode and a paragraph in the

narrative mode. The skills-based approach is outlined extensively in a department-mandated textbook (Fawcett), which clearly illustrates a linear model of writing development.

I have also taught Sunday morning writing classes for continuing education students at CUNY. For these students, enforcement of the linear narrative by the English Department has typically been more lax, perhaps because the students are older and thought to be more mature. In these classes, I begin teaching writing by working with large chunks of text before moving on to paragraphs and sentences. In the first half of the semester, the students and I assemble a course reader that will be used for the remainder of the course. During this time, we find out together what happens when students are the ones, as opposed to publishers and teachers, who select and arrange and in some cases write the texts that make up the course textbook. Students select the themes that the course anthology revolves around, they gather the texts that might be included, and they make decisions on which articles will appear and in what state of excerptation. Some of the major themes indicated in the table of contents – animal rescue, "straight-edge" culture, perceptions of Islam, breastfeeding, to name a few – speak to the diversity of the students in ways that well-meaning editors at McGraw-Hill could not. During the process, students are confronted with interesting rhetorical questions: *How much should I crop this particular piece of writing? What if a lot of our selections come from the same source? How many texts should be in each subsection?*

After they have researched and gathered lots of materials on their topics and arranged those materials in some kind of order, students can assess where their own knowledge and experience fits in. As Howard, Hull, and Rose have pointed out, students who manipulate other composers' texts are more likely to enter the conversations that those texts are a part of. In an end-of-semester reflection, one student said:

The anthology project is something very different from other writing assignments I have done in the past. In the past I have collected various texts but the final paper would be my own words. In this project my writing is combined with that of others to form a collection of notable work. There is also flexibility in that you can use more than one type of media such as poems, plays, movies, videos, music, and memoirs.

This student's reflective comment accurately describes the anthologizing as a particular form of composing.

A mentor who came to evaluate the course wrote that "[I]f Chris had described to me in advance what he had in mind for the course – that students would collaborate to create the course reader over the course of eight weeks – I would have questioned the wisdom of the project and any instructor's ability to fully engage the students in literary project of such magnitude." The comment, which was admittedly meant to make me look good to those reading the report, also represents a widespread underestimation of the degree to which students are able to perform mediation of cultural items on and off the Web.

I contrast the experience in our classroom against the experience of a student who is assigned a course anthology (or even a Barnes & Nobles shopper who picks up, say, *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2010*). This student/reader is largely cut off from the selection process, the organization of the table of contents, the binding, and the writing of the introductory preface. By the time a student flips to an essay in a course reader, if the editors have done their job well, the text appears to have slid naturally into its spot. The strategizing and hand-wringing and politicking and hustling tend to be obscured by the editors and publishers.

Instead of demystifying and denaturalizing structuring dynamics, pre-packaged anthologies can mystify and naturalize.

I was initially inspired to introduce anthologizing into my classes when I read an essay by Nancy Chick. In "Anthologizing Transformation," Chick describes an assignment in her poetry classes whereby students create anthologies of important poems from the English literary tradition. While constructing these anthologies, students are not really trying to interpret poems; instead, they regard the poems as materials to build with. They don't agree-or-disagree with a poem or connect-it-to-personal-experience; the students strategize to employ the poems in service of their own rhetorical goals. In the course of gathering texts, Chick's students encounter poems in contexts, which may, at first glance, seem natural and inevitable. But as students copy the texts and move them into different contexts, they witness the poems undergoing rhetorical transformations. Students experiment with possible configurations for the table of contents, and they see how a poem comes to mean differently as its position changes. To paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt, this kind of macrocomposition "subvert[s] the tendency to think of aesthetic representation as ultimately autonomous, separable from its cultural context and hence divorced from the social, ideological, and material matrix in which all art is produced and consumed" (164).

As I read about Chick's work with students on personal poetry anthologies, it occurred to me that, since anthologies are not limited to literary writing and poetry, I could adapt her anthology assignment into my writing courses – basic, introductory, and advanced alike. In doing so, I have found that anthology assignments draw on the capacities of students like Tanya (who is profiled in Hull and Rose's "Rethinking Remediation"): these are students who tend to find their own voices through the aggregation of other people's voices.

While the ePortfolios described by Klages and Clark are a useful approach to teaching digital literacy in basic writing classrooms, compiling anthologies are an additional tool that basic writing teachers can use to help basic writers to mesh their academic and online identities. Whether the anthologies are constructed online or in print form, they encourage students to use their existing and developing compilation skills in academic contexts.

Learning to provide stewardship for the work of others can empower students in basic writing classes. As Joseph Grigely notes, the role of the steward is traditionally one of power and authority. He writes, "Editors prefigure the possible range of our textual encounters; conservators and restorers determine what degree of the past shall remain in the present; curators decide for us the sequences by which artworks are exhibited, and these sequences affect how we read works as individual texts, and how we read them collectively as history" (74-75). Positioned as framers of cultural items, as opposed to consumers of already-framed materials, students learn about the circumstances and technologies required for knowledge creation.

In contrast, adherence to a linear narrative in basic writing courses only reinforces the anti-democratic vision of Edward Bernays (inventor of modern propaganda, a public relations consultant for United Fruit Company, and nephew of Sigmund Freud). He reasoned in 1928 that it is only the "the intelligent few" who should be trained to act as "cultural mediators." These cultural mediators – anthologists and textbook makers, to name a few – must be tasked with translating hegemonic policies into narrative frameworks legible to mass audiences. "Only through the active energy of the intelligent few," Bernays writes, "can the public at large become aware of and act upon new ideas" (31). When teachers of basic writing, with cover from the linear narrative, prohibit stewardship of other people's work, they position students in a

receiving role for narrative frameworks; students are not expected to participate in articulating the frameworks themselves.

In addition to its convergences with the literacies and politics of the Web, the anthological genre can be beneficial for students in basic writing courses for other reasons. Anthologizing creates diverse opportunities for improvement in writing because editors play so many different roles – reader, collector, often a contributor, and often the writer of the introductory preface. Anthology editing necessitates collaboration between editors and editorial committees; reflection and summary in the anthology preface; active reading and evaluation; writing "from scratch"; decision-making; higher-order reasoning; and citation of other voices.

Anthology edition is not the only form of macrocomposition that can be adopted in basic writing classrooms. At the University of Texas, Jodi Relyea has instructed students in museum curation and mixtape making (Brown). Ira Livingston, theorist of cultural studies, recommends personal library arrangement as a way for students to make modest contributions to epistemological change (26-30). In each of these examples, editors take "already-been-chewed" resources from their environment and shape them in ways that are colored by their emotions, their tastes, their histories, their logics, and their dialects. Whether performed in one's own library or in the classroom or on the Web, macrocomposition may achieve disarticulation and decanonization, i.e., calcified categories may soften. Because "a single ordering cannot maintain a seamless and uncontradictory hegemony even at a single historical moment or in a single culture or knowledge system" (Livingston 26), macrocomposition creates opportunities for students to intervene and participate in ongoing reorderings of society.

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