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Abstract

This study considers the contemporary post-literacy moment and its kinship to the historical change from Anglo-Saxon orality to English literacy, by suggesting a parallel between the scholarship of Walter Ong and the new media scholar Lev Manovich. Their perspectives on communication and textuality inform the conversation about how contemporary first-year writers make meaning. Student writers exhibit remix as a kind of new orality, some sequel to literacy. This notion speaks to the students' orientation as digital composers, for whom the written word has been displaced as the primary way to present knowledge. Primary data is drawn from student invention blogs.

Ancient rhetoricians considered memory as both storage and recollection. Memory work has an important role in the study of the changing nature of the book. Recollection is tied to mimicry, which manifests as a copy in the same media or in some kindred media. Sound has yielded to text or text-as-image as a memorial cue since the first transcription of music, the transposition of digital recording of oral, spoken word performance into text, or the use of cell phones as purveyors of text messages. There is a familiar oscillation, a swing from sound to text, moves governed by the principles of *memoria*, which simultaneously contains meaning (storage) and traces the mode by which meaning is assembled (recollection). When there is an explosion of meaning in a restricted storage space, the recorder must reduce knowledge to a series of inscribed markers.

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This is why matrices, grids, and tables are so frequently used to represent large-scale meaning. This notion is especially relevant to understanding the work of student bloggers learning to write. Originally, weblogs filtered links to other Web materials. There is a direct line of descent between the reductive Anglo-Saxon *Easter Table Chronicle* and the first uses of filtered digital weblogs. The first tables were designed to memorialize and calculate the dates of the Easter feast days, but Anglo-Saxon scribes were compelled on occasion to fill the cells of the tables with data recalling important historical events. In time, blogs became annotated and more expressive in the manner of the *Chronicle*.

Such expansions are parallel, not because one venue remediates the other (as theorized by Bolter & Grusin, 2000), but because the human imagination as it works through memory is dependent upon such oscillation between reduction and expansion. Drawing on 400 student blogs (2009–2013), I examine the oscillation between modes of memory evident in the transition from a predominantly textual to a digital culture to demonstrate how this phenomenon features in contemporary reading (and writing) practices.

There is an unlikely kinship between the historical moment in which an oral production becomes a literate production and this present moment when student writing on the page (literate production) becomes student writing on the screen (digital production). In *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2002), Walter Ong provides a five-part scheme that suggests what orality is/was/may be for a literate audience. Indeed, Ong's subtitle, *The Technologizing of the Word*, offers an appropriate bridge to the work of the new media critic Lev Manovich. In *The Language of New Media* (2002), Manovich provides the logic of new media as well as a framework demonstrating the features of new media for a new media audience. These perspectives on communication – one backward looking, one forward seeking – inform the conversation about how contemporary first-year writers make meaning in new media and its strange relationship to the oral tradition. The possibility that student writers exhibit remix as a kind of new orality, some sequel to literacy, is useful for crafting writing instruction that speaks to the students' orientation as digital composers, for whom the written word has been displaced as the primary way to present knowledge.

Current literacy practices and the destabilizing of the text (Striphas, 2011; Birkerts, 2006; Kress, 2003; & Gee, 1992) are regularly attributed to rise of new media, but it is just as likely that new media reflects the way literacy is changing. After all, what use is new media that does not fulfill a group's practice? Which way does influence tend? The relationship of the composer to media – new or old – reflects the cultural moment and influences the way s/he makes meaning. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich (2002) explains that changes in "media technologies are correlated with social change" (p. 41). New developments in media reflect the cultural moment, especially as it relates to technology, and culture drives these developments. The rise of new media as a composing space and the principles governing it reflect the desires of the writer or composer working in its space.¹ What is the current media moment and what is the logic and sensibility about composers working in this media? How does this logic apply to student writers? What is happening to writing?

The logic of the composing space fulfills the cultural demands of its consumers and producers. In this cultural moment, two opposing values of new media consumption are in play for university students. They value customization while simultaneously valuing the brand. Students who have grown up as consumers of new media experiences have twin expectations (for individuation and branding) about the way they receive information, which necessarily carries over to the way they prepare information in writing. Manovich (2002) notes: "If the logic of old media corresponds to the logic of industrial mass society, the logic of new media fits the logic of the postindustrial society, which values individuality over conformity" (p. 41). Old media copies the factory model, dispensing identical media objects, which are widely distributed. New media reflects customization and individualized dissemination to small interest groups. For example, following Manovich's theory, one might conclude that old media is like listening from start to finish to a long-playing record or concept album, in which the artist has organized the listening experience, while new media is like listening to an iPod with customized playlists, which the user has designed. This example resonates, because it reflects the expectation of contemporary students who value customization, even as they experience art.² They become producers, co-producers, or perhaps re-producers of the music they consume. In short, they remix.³

In the remix, they become re-makers of meaning. This tendency is in evidence on their blogs, a kind of new media production, in many ways. For example, even a blog title can reflect this kind of recombination. One student's blog title, *iWrite*, is a derivative customization of a brand for his own purposes. This phenomenon is likewise evident in the promulgation of Internet memes, remixed digital images and text, which are remediated and circulated as private snapshot versions of public events reconstituted in personalized bites of information or misinformation. Old media values standardization while new media makes possible all kinds of remixing customized for individual use. The values of old media have been replaced, because current users sought a flexible media experience, one circumscribed by customary, known pieces or small configurable units. One could surmise that the advent of tools able to recombine and distribute media has changed the culture, but it is equally possible to conclude that the cultural change prompted the development of the technology. Either way, there is a marked cultural celebration of the individual and the individual's participation in new media events. No longer does a governing entity manage or editorialize media – church, state, academy – but rather the individual can opt to receive an array of digital material, and more importantly, compose or remix digital objects.

Remix as a participatory cultural practice is impractical in old media, whether that media is a manuscript, book, newspaper, or other print text. Responses to texts are not necessarily attached physically to primary texts as glosses. Those that were could easily be divorced from the text, disabling interaction. The reader in the text becomes a phantom. While old media promoted the rise of literacy as a set of standardized cultural practices (Brandt, 2009; Gee, 1992), it promulgated a type of participatory culture that was one directional. In other words, information flowed one way, from the writer to the reader. Manovich (2002) emphasizes the changes that old media brought: "What standardization means to modern society is that what was private became public. What was unique became mass produced. What was hidden in an individual's mind became shared" (p. 60). This impulse to share is productive. Indeed, this one-way

sharing is problematic only when two-way sharing becomes possible. This is precisely the anxiety that students reveal about blogging.⁴

This tension between private and public is very much part of living in a community, especially one that is divided about its relationship to knowledge and the making of meaning. In this cultural moment, there is a new rise of the individual, one not burdened by *making something new* but instead characterized by the freedom afforded by collage, mash-up, and remix. It is a moment that particularly celebrates the individual's point of view, which is a gaze that co-opts other digital property liberally in a manner much like the absorptive spirit of oral formulaic productions. This kind of participation embraces the re-use mentality, which is companion in spirit to the Anglo-Saxon scop's performance of oral heroic poetry. Contemporary students have a different relationship to knowledge, one that easily embraces new media re-combinations. This impulse is problematic for a culture that values intellectual property and acknowledgement of source materials (Barton, 1993; Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007).⁵

The volume of self-sponsored, remediated writing in new media compositions and in social media interactions on the Web is staggering. Manovich (2002) wonders "what to make of this modern desire to externalize the mind?" (p. 60). However, it might not be useful to characterize this impulse to share the mind as necessarily a modern desire (Bruffee, 1984). In fact, all writing, in any media, is an act of exhibitionism. For student writers, who are emerging as knowledge producers, the question is even more fraught as they straddle two paradigms for making meaning. One part values knowledge as standard and knowable, while the other seeks abnormal discourse that can add to what is known (Freire, 2000; Rorty, 1981; Bruffee, 1984). These contradictory impulses are the crux of learning and the crux of learning to write. One must learn the conventions of academic discourse and simultaneously learn to override those standards in order to contribute to that discourse.

What complicates this process is the rise of new media, which seduces student writers with ease of use and immediate, purported, professional presentation. But what happens to the writing of students who are composing in new spaces in which there are few conventions and a perceived lawlessness? At first glance, the student blog offers little of the hallmarks of polished academic writing; there is a disregard for order and arrangement, revision, and attribution. But there is also tremendous intellectual activity represented, which is associative and detailed. There is evidence of important attention to design, to invention, to gathering resources, and to evaluation of materials. Therefore, one must rethink what one is looking at by considering these important questions: What are the features of student writing on a blog? What happens to the writing of those who compose on blogs and who use blogs as platforms to showcase their projects or store their research? What happens when these user-writers can make meaning in ways that are not writing? How can we understand and assess the content of student invention blogs? What are we looking at anyway? What is happening to writing? What is happening to student writing is manifest in the media in which it is composed now and in other formats in the past. In these digital times, this change is happening in a very rapid, public way, and this is especially in evidence on the student blog.

Student new media productions posted on course blogs or elsewhere on the Web can potentially reach large audiences, but for the most part, they will be isolated, small-screen events for one viewer at a time. Social media exchanges, as a type of new media production, are a good example. An online exchange can be customized for a group following, and then sub-selected further for a smaller subset (e.g., entire Facebook friend lists can be bypassed by individual inbox messages). This channeled and pseudo-protected reception is misleading, and the exciting (or damning) potential for addressing a large group looms for users writing in online spaces. This capacity to be read – or heard – may make student composers better performers, but it can also seem to work against them. There is an ambiguous quality to writing on the screen that Vivian Serfaty (2004) calls “both a symbolic re-appropriation of social space and the violation of social codes” (p. 14). For the professional American bloggers Serfaty studied, the screen functions as both a mirror and a veil, reflecting parts of a writer’s identity and obscuring others.⁶ This is also true of student bloggers who invite readership and shy away from it, too.

In fact, student writing on a blog – with its possibilities to include hypertext, visual and aural media, and with its access to a readership and commentary – challenges basic assumptions about textuality and specifically challenges our ideas about reading and writing as private or public. Instead, blogs and the work hosted on them inhabit an interstitial space, the threshold between private and public. It is frequently not writing, or at least not writing as we know it. As such, the material of the blog is more than speech and perhaps more than literacy. It is also a public-private or private-public environment, depending on how widely it is promoted and the kinds of readers who read and share it. The blog space is a peculiar residence that is neither open nor closed. In fact, during the four years of writing and investigating the compositions of 400 student bloggers, only one has opted to privatize her blog. The others agreed to learn in public. When asked about this extroversion, students remarked that their blogs may be public, but they have to be found first. Their willingness to share their writing expresses a half-concealed, half-revealed mentality, a kind of digital message in a bottle, tossed in a moment of optimism that the right audience (or any audience) will find it. It is a moment that belongs to these digital times, one that contributes to the definition of this kind of writing as not strictly literate but rather some sequel to literacy.

One way that student new media productions traverse public and private (as well as temporal) space is evident in the manner in which their determining characteristics, as outlined by Manovich (2002) in *The Language of New Media*, correspond with the features of oral formulaic productions, as delineated by Ong in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. There is an unlikely kinship between the historical moment in which an oral production becomes a literate production and this moment when student writing on the page as a literate production becomes student writing on the screen as a digital production. This is a curious parallel to say the least. It pairs the act of composing from memory in speech with the act of composing on the screen, and it suggests how the habits of mind of the Anglo-Saxon scop might be relevant to understanding the intellectual practices of students who remix. This essay outlines the way the traits of oral formulaic productions are analogous to the principles governing new media productions. It then suggests some reasons why this is, and offers some suggestions about what will happen.

According to Ong (2002), oral productions are additive, aggregative, redundant, conservative, close to the human lifeworld, agonistic, empathetic and participatory, homeostatic, and situational. It is striking how many of these nine traits correlate to the new media productions of first-year writers. It is even more telling how these traits correspond to Manovich's (2002) five principles of new media and the nature of digital productions, which are characterized by: (i) numerical representation; (ii) modularity ("fractal structure"); (iii) automation; (iv) variability ("liquid"); and (v) transcoding. By applying Ong's traits for oral productions to Manovich's principles of new media, one can certainly make the case that this contemporary digital moment recalls primary orality and the early moments of English literacy. Jay David Bolter (2001) proposes: "The computer rewrites the history of writing by sending us back to reconsider nearly every aspect of the earlier technologies" (p. 46). Perhaps this is a moment of back to the future. This new media moment parallels a pre-mediated moment, primary orality. Their correspondence suggests an interesting relationship that might influence the way we understand student compositions in new media. In this essay, I will map the ways that Ong's traits correspond to Manovich's principles using evidence from student blogs.

Ong's (2002) first three characteristics of primary orality – that it is additive, aggregative, redundant – are related to the formulaic and recombinant nature of orally produced expression.⁷ Exclusively oral cultures make productions composed of sound, and oral poets organize the sound in patterns, presenting knowledge formulaically and systematically for ease of recollection. Ong explains:

In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would be abiding knowledge but simply a passing thought, however complex (p. 35–36).

This is the nature of the oral production; its ideas must be patterned and formalized or else be lost and never retransmitted. In this way, oral compositions are fractal, and their independent elements are assembled into a whole production, which is variable and dependent upon the rhetorical situation of the performance. Oral compositions are standardized to an extent, so that they can be committed to memory. However, memory is not simply the storage of data but the construction of pattern that make the data able to be recalled. Memory is both storage and retrieval, so the oral composition is funded with parts that must be portable, so they can be linked associatively. Recollection occurs consciously through association: one finds or hunts out the stored memory-impression by using other things associated with it either through a logical connection or through habit, the sort of associations taught by the various *artes memorativa*. In *The Book of Memory* (1990), Mary Carruthers explains: "Memoria refers not to how something is communicated, but to what happens once one has received it, to the interactive process of familiarizing – or textualizing – which occurs between oneself and others' words in memory" (p. 13). For the oral production to be repeatable, redundant, and thus successful, the teller must make connections that pair formulaic segments, which can be repositioned, added, or removed according to the rhetorical situation. In what seems to be a contradiction, this standardization of the

oral production is quite variable, an important trait that relates directly to writing in new media.

Student work on blogs is a kind of memory work and is similarly characterized by these traits (additive, aggregative, and redundant). Blogs are arranged in chronological order – a forward rhetorical movement like speech. Students self report that they do not feel obliged to edit their writing on the blog, assuming that it is dated and time-stamped, and as such, a one-off communiqué. In addition, there is a marked use of binomial expressions and merisms on student blogs, which suggests a deeper connection between the speech act of conversation and writing online. Linguistically, a binomial pair is a set of two words or phrases of the same grammatical category, having some semantic relationship and joined by some syntactic device like a conjunction. Often, such expressions are termed irreversible; they occur only in one order. It has been shown that binomials in speech (as non-literary language) serve an important communicative purpose. Ourania Hatzidaki (2000) explains: “binomials act as a lexicalized and, therefore, elegant and well-integrated temporal space which speakers create automatically and with the minimum of cognitive effort whilst coping with delays in the formulation of thought and argument” (p. 3). In this way, the binomial expression functions in conversation as repetitive and informationally sparse pairs that aid the memory and recall of the speaker. An investigation contrasting 100 handwritten sample essays and 100 blogged essays shows that the blog writers used binomial expressions six times more frequently.⁸ This data might lead one to conclude that students writing by hand evince greater control over this linguistic feature in written language than those blogging. Or, one could argue that the use of this linguistic pattern signals the blog as a kind of conversation that draws on memorial cues evinced by such pairing.

However, some binomials used by student writers suggest a different rhetorical move. While student blog writers included some of the most frequently used binomials in speech, the preponderance of binomials are merely doubled terms – two by two expressions of the same or nearly synonymous terms. These doublets are unlike formulaic merisms and locked binomials, in that their twin terms serve like mirror images of one another, and they are newly coined. Doublets of this sort indicate a kind of seeking. The writer quests for meaning and exactitude and is defeated. This may be why the writer elects to double some terms, as a means of providing choices and offering options. As a result, the writer yields authority for the making of meaning to the reader. This tentative gesture is somewhat submissive, but it also hearkens back to the notion of interactivity and the participatory nature of new media experiences. The student blogger may be offering the reader choices in the way that s/he is accustomed to experiencing new media productions herself.⁹ Thus, the frequent use of binomials in student writing on blogs is like an oral production in that they are additive, aggregative, and redundant, and at the same time, interactive. At base, this new media experience is evocative of the oral formulaic production.

In a manner of speaking, the oral production has a fractal structure (one that is additive, aggregative, redundant) that can be compared with Manovich's (2002) principle of modularity. All media elements – whether images, sounds, shapes, or movement – can be represented as sets of data (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters,

scripts, and so on), and these elements are assembled into larger objects or sets of elements. These digital objects can be combined into even larger objects without losing their independence. Manovich notes that the Web in its entirety is a modular structure, and Madeleine Sorapure (2003) notes the Web is “composed of independent sites and pages, and each webpage itself is composed of elements and code that can be independently modified” (p. 1). The constituents of oral poetry work this way, too. The smallest features of oral poetry are moveable and independent. Alliterating words are bound phonetically; formulaic expressions are bound semantically; the Anglo-Saxon poetic line is bound rhythmically; story elements are bound to occasion. Hence, the phoneme corresponds to pixel, the formulaic expression to planar polygon, the poetic line to the three-dimensional voxel, and situation to character and script. All of these elements can be reordered or reprogrammed into meaningful units. Even working in recombination, they retain their independence.

In theory, a typical student essay can be said to have a modular structure, but the independence of its smallest elements is questionable. Essay writing as a literate artifact essentially reduces the independence of its parts, as it entails managing elements (letter, morpheme, word, sentence, paragraph) into a sequential, ordered presentation. But student blogs do not exhibit such a managed, literate presentation. Instead, they can be characterized by the modularity of new media; associative links guarantee that blogs will never be read the same way twice. The modular, fractal nature of an Anglo-Saxon oral production lends it variability, a trait that suggests that it may not have been performed the same way twice. This is analogous to variability of new media events, which are likewise “not something fixed once and for all but can exist in different, potentially infinite versions” (Manovich, 2002, p. 36).

Both kinds of events – oral production and new media – are marked by a liquid status. Literacy, on the other hand, is marked by fixity, and writing as a technology admits some interactions and restricts others. For example, the only way to modify a text is to superimpose other texts or material (e.g., image) upon it. Some material (e.g., sound, moving image) cannot be imposed upon the page. A blog, however, is infinitely flexible, so student writing on a blog is something neither oral nor literate. It is tempting to conclude that in the movement from orality to literacy, one should be able to plot writing on a blog at an intermediary position between the two. However, it is probably more useful to think of blog writing as graphed on a recurring wave, as a return to communication that shares features with oral productions.

One way to think about this contemporary literacy moment is to reflect upon another analogous moment, in which an oral poem takes up residence in a textual space. An English text is designed to be read from top to bottom, left to right, front to back, and this material nature of the page factors into the way the text can be accessed and distributed. This can be contrasted with the way an oral poem is constructed in speech. Its design is governed by the strumming rhythm of the scop's voice and harp, and it can be modified to suit the particular rhetorical situation of the performance. On the other hand, consider the poor condition of Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, the extant *Beowulf* manuscript: burned, worm-eaten, smudged, faded, and unique. Consider also its odd genesis: a pagan, heroic, oral poem most probably recorded covertly by a cleric. It is

difficult to read given its deteriorating condition and the constraints of its production. These material limits make one marvel that even a single manuscript exists.

In addition to considering the materiality of the text, it is worthwhile to reflect on the changing relationship of writers to writing over time. Indeed the history of textuality bears directly on the necessity for revisionist composition pedagogy. For Middle English writers, the source of *auctorite* was the Bible and the associated auctors, Church fathers. Eventually, the ancient writers – both Greek and Roman – came to be associated with *auctorite* as well (Minnis, 2009, p. 6). But oftentimes, a medieval scribe would feel compelled to interpret a text and provide a meta-text in image and gloss. Such meta-texts colonize the manuscript's margins with the authoritative text set in the centre of the page. Some medieval glosses are brief sidebars, while others dominate the page and sometimes overwhelm the centred text. The inclusion of the meta-text is one way that medieval writers could mediate the difference between an oral performance and a literate performance. Writers glossed in order to enter into the conversation initiated by an auctor. This is the movement from oral to literate expression and marks an important moment in English textuality. The gloss is a precursor to the composition essay as well as a precursor to a hyperlink on a blog. Both indicate the absent presence of additional other material.

The earliest English writers acknowledge that the innovative, technological leap from orality to literacy made for an odd circumstance in that the written word represents both sound and meaning. Early English manuscript codices are, after all, often multimedia presentations – text, illumination, and gloss – but they are a different kind of happening (Sirc, 2002). These early English writers believed that a good text had these attributes and that an important text was a composite multimedia event. In the twenty-first century, students use new media to recombine textual, visual, and meta-textual components with actual sound bytes. Indeed, each new media event is potentially a remix. This kind of move has occurred previously in the history of the book. In his assessment of the relationship of the text to various other cultural forms in the Middle Ages, Jesse Gellrich (1987) remarks upon “the gap between human writing and transcendent language” (p. 29). Gellrich posits that the book:

remained a determinant of cultural growth from the time of Augustine's emphasis on it and continued until its magnificent illustrations in late Gothic art, when the “unbinding” of the Book became inevitable in the ornamentality and artificiality that eventually flowered in the Baroque styles of the seventeenth century. (p. 23)

In this alleged dismantling, certain components of the book likewise became unbound. For example, book illuminations and miniatures were excised and ultimately took on larger cultural significance as material cultural. Likewise, critical matter formerly included as gloss or marginalia were separated and developed further to stand on their own.

What is relevant to this discussion is this separation of the critical apparatus, the ancient text's gloss, into a derivative essay divorced from its text. This apparatus is none other than the composition of first-year writing. If one considers that the academic essay is the progeny of the glosses of medieval codices, one can better understand the

shift in its significance in the context of the current time. For once again, there is “a gap between human writing and transcendent language,” only this time that gap is supplied by the contemporary student’s desire to minimize the academic essay and return it to the margins of the text that comments secondarily on the main new media composition. In part, the current shift suggests a reverse Gutenberg effect, which initially privileges orality over literacy.

These multimodal students have relegated the written essay to the margins of communication, assigning the essay the role of gloss or explanatory note. The student essay then explicates some other authoritative production that is explicitly non-textual. What happens very quickly in the history of the text is that the writings of ancient auctors – authorities who claim centre page – become surrounded by visual details that promote, explain, and illuminate the central text and, of particular interest to this discussion about student writing, are the accompanying glosses, the apparatus that explain the central text. The gloss functions as an addition to the text, enhancing the reader’s understanding of and appreciation for the text, but at the same time, the gloss is also an interruption, disrupting the reading path and offering alien material not originally in evidence. This is why the gloss as a stand-alone artifact can be likened to a student’s explication of a text or formation of an argument.

The gloss is external to the established textual *auctorite*, and its function is to support the central text. The gloss functions as evidence of two voices in a text, as a kind of polyphony. The glossator adds to a body of knowledge by explicating a text and by introducing a new, nuanced understanding of the central text. Glosses form a genre of writing that is a kind of hyper-literacy – text-to-text, annotative in tenor. However, student blogs, or any blogs, are not a genre necessarily. They are a medium, which is “just a ‘middle,’ an in-between or go-between, a space or pathway or messenger that connects two things – a sender to receiver, a writer to reader, an artist to a beholder” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 4). What we look at when we look at student blogs is not solely a literacy artifact.

Ong (2002) presents his fourth characteristic of oral formulaic poetry as conservative and traditional, a quality that suggests a kind of basic information management. A cognate idea in Manovich’s (2002) principles is the idea of automation, which suggests that mechanisms proceed on their own without human intention. Ong defines the scop’s exigency to repeat information as “inhibiting intellectual experimentation” (p. 41). This attribute of oral productions has import on student new media compositions, which initially tend to be fairly conservative as well. Although they have access to the means of production and resources to support their endeavours, student new media productions are largely derivative of what they have sampled elsewhere. For example, to complete a photo-montage project, only six students of 200 used original photos, merely 3%. This might be consistent with the notion that students are first consumers of new media and not necessarily producers of it. However, a quick survey of their phones yields digital albums in which they are curating thousands of photographs. Another explanation for this conservative and self-restricting impulse might be attributed to the angst students experience writing themselves into novel situations. They may be expert practitioners of new media (as both consumers and producers) outside of the classroom, yet inhibited practitioners when transferring that experience to the university. This discrepancy is perhaps an extension of Bartholomae’s notion that when writing, students are compelled

to approximate the discourse of the university, and that such awkward inventing, equally applies to composing in new media.

There is other compelling evidence that may suggest that students writing in online spaces are equally conservative about expression. At first, students are reluctant to write themselves into the online text, not because they feel inferior, but because they are being conservative along the model of the Anglo-Saxon scops. Both reuse and recycle material, because they identify with it and want it to be retained. For example, student blog titles are supposed to reflect their understanding of their goal in blogging for a class or suggest something about the blog's purpose as a space to generate, develop, and present ideas and arguments. However, many students misread this direction and make blog titles that employ the course name or theme (28%); some use a variation on their own name (22%). These particular titles (a total of 50% of blog titles catalogued) are sufficient to categorize the work, but they do not express any meaning other than a tag. In one way, this aggregating identification is useful for their organization (course name) or for the instructor's (student name), but in actuality, such blog titles disclose nothing about purpose and, as tags, provide little folksonomy or social indexing for either writer or reader.

A few distance themselves from their blog by classifying their blogs as obligatory (e.g., *This is a Mandatory Blog* and *One Professor. One Student. One Grade.*), but at least these titles express a real exigence. Half of the blog titles prepared by students are conservative in this way. When they do express meaning relevant to the writing experience, they frequently allude to some other writer's text, referencing musical lyrics, movies, literature, and commercials (12%), or they employ stock language, using aphorisms and clichés for their titles (10%). Thus, nearly one quarter of the blog titles (22%) mimic the conservative impulse of Anglo-Saxon scops to situate their making as belonging to a particular textual tradition. Bolter (1991) addresses the effect of this accumulation of cross-references and known expressions:

[Writing] in the electronic writing space can be a collective process: the writer creates some connections, which pass to the first reader, who may add new connections and pass the results on to another reader, and so on. This tradition, this passing on of the text from writer to reader, who then becomes a writer for other readers, is nothing new; it is the literal meaning of the word "tradition." (p. 202).

In one sense, their use of the re-appropriated language situates them in a cultural tradition.¹⁰ In another, they are assembling a text without a context. The blog title is not usually repeated nor explained in the content of the course blog. It can be said that this kind of collection is automatic, some repetition from verbal memory. This is similar to Manovich's description of the principle of automation, which is characterized by the removal of human intentionality from the creative process (p. 53). Such disembodied references may indicate a lack of thoughtful connection, or might indicate the opposite by being evidence of traditional language use.

Ong (2002) also demonstrates that oral productions are empathetic and participatory. The blog has some traits of conversation, but it is probably better termed an interactive performance. Blog writers demonstrate this sensibility by setting their blogs to accept

comments certainly, but there are other clues about the participatory nature of the blogger. As has been demonstrated, this offering of choices is evinced in one way by the excessive use of binomial expressions. It is also in evidence by the peculiar use of quotation marks in student writing on blogs.

Misused and inappropriate quotation marks wink and flirt in the first paragraphs of the blog posts of many first-year student writers. The strange and inconsistent uses of quotation marks in student writing is evidence of a cultural trend that in part mirrors the contemporary flexing of punctuation marks from symbols as notation to signs. While the technology of printing in the later Middle Ages contributed to the stabilization of symbols in texts, the technology of the Web, of cell phones, and of social media radically destabilizes the function of punctuation marks. It is tempting to regard this radicalization, these flippant uses of quotation marks as an outcome of online writers' sensibility of the visual puns to be made by the various re-combinations of punctuation marks.

These misused marks can perform the novelty of making new meaning, a clever sliding or conflation of meaning. They may also refer hypertextually to some other known text, some lift-the-flap knowledge; they hint at some collective knowledge that is passed over, something that cannot (or will not) be fully discussed here. However, there is another possibility for this change in the usage of the quotation mark that suggests an awareness of the way writing is changing in the new media environment. Indeed, the odd quotation mark signals a new rhetorical gesture made possible by the online writing sensibilities of our students. There is clearly new freedom offered by the online writing experience, but it is also oppressive, compelling writers to punctuate new kinds of rhetorical moves. Novel uses of quotation marks in student writing also occur in print but with far less frequency than on blogs.

This particular use of the quotation mark also designates student writers' uncertain relationship to knowledge. Rhetorically, such usage can be viewed as a new kind of evidential. At times, misappropriated quotation marks denote the conscious decision of thinking writers to enhance or amplify their texts. These writers engage with their texts as if they are empowered rhetorically by some new emphatic marking. There are other instances when quotation marks are dismissive, functioning as if some kind of shorthand or ellipsis. The gesture serves to note something equivalent to "*I'm not going to explain this now, but you must know what I mean.*" Instead of pretending to pass over the expression, as with *occupatio*, the student writer actually does eclipse the note. Such usage serves as a kind of deferral.

Manovich (2002) uses the fifth principle of transcoding as a catchall term to distinguish between the two layers ordinarily present in new media productions, what he terms the "cultural layer" and the "computer layer" (p. 46). He finds that this difference serves as an important distinction because of the way new media is both created and distributed via computers. He attributes its significance to a variety of factors about the way the human and the machine interact:

The ways in which the computer models the world, represents data, and allows us to operate on it; the key operations behind all computer programs (such as

search, match, sort, and filter); the conventions of HCI – in short, what can be called the computer’s ontology, epistemology, and pragmatics – influence the cultural layer of new media, its organization, its emerging genres, its contents. (p. 46)

The new media experience is bound by all of these constraints, much in the way a textual reading experience is bound by its material constraints.

The theory of new media is especially appropriate to apply to the content of student blogs, especially invention blogs, which are used as a platform to present fluid work in progress. What we read on a student blog is not evidence of literacy, but rather it can be characterized as some sequel to literacy, some post-literacy, or new or tertiary orality. Students sense this participatory impulse, too. A survey of their blog titles referencing speaking and listening corroborates this admission. Significantly, 10% of student’s blog titles directly address the reader and initiate conversation. Some actively engage the reader’s sense of hearing (e.g., *Listen to Me, Please...* and *Hello – Hello – Can You Hear Me Now?*) or some variation of sight-sound interplay (e.g., *Look at Me When I’m Writing to You – It’s Rude Not to*). Other blog titles invite participation (e.g., *Your Thoughts Here* and *Are You Still There? I Know I’m Not*).

Students who privilege visual and aural modes to express themselves benefit from pre-writing multimodal strategies that capitalize on their non-textual capabilities, and invention blogs offer them multiple ways to achieve this. By preferring new media as a primary means of expression, students have resituated the written essay as a secondary communication, a companion but lesser authority. Thus, in this post-literacy moment, the essay is the gloss.

In fact, student writing on blogs (with its potential to include hypertext, visual and aural media, and with its access to audience and commentary) challenges basic assumptions about textuality. When we refashion writing space by making it flexible, interactive, and readily accessible, there is no continuous flow of the reading path. There are abrupt changes of direction and tempo as users (readers, listeners, and writers) interact. They compose in writing, in image, in audio, and in video. They respond in kind. They refashion the writing space over and over again (Bolter, 2001). Collin Gifford Brooke (2009) applies this refashioning of the writing space to writing pedagogy: “We encourage them to shift their own perceptions of writing, urging them not to think of their essays as empty, preexisting containers to be filled, but rather as texts emerging from an ongoing process of reading, thinking, and writing” (p. 25). This potential can be fully realized with writing on a blog. Students’ attitudes about writing change when they compose in digital spaces, as these spaces authorize them to interact with texts and meaning in new and important ways.

What we read on student blogs can often seem fragmented and unfinished. What we witness in student writing on blogs is not what we are accustomed to reading in print. We are hearing writing. This is why Ong’s (2002) attributes for oral productions can be so closely fitted to Manovich’s (2002) principles of new media. In some ways, blog work is a superior indicator of the struggles and victories students have with the making of

meaning. Readers must process the student blogger's rhetorical moves in other ways. On student blogs, the transfer of power to the reader ultimately refunds to the writer.

This investigation considers the contemporary post-literacy moment and its kinship to the historical change from Anglo-Saxon orality to English literacy. In effect, my work suggests a parallel relationship or bridge between the scholarship of Walter J. Ong and the new media scholar Lev Manovich. Their perspectives on communication and textuality – one backward looking, one forward seeking – inform the conversation about how contemporary first-year writers make meaning in important ways, especially with respect to students' facility to link aggregatively and associatively and to remix. This is a promising investigation for a number of reasons. In 1982, Ong anticipated "the sequels of literacy" by suggesting the potentialities of some sort of new orality, and his prophecy has proven true in the extensive digital propagation and distribution of voice, image, and data. These literacies are pluralistic occasions of technological communication over a variety of platforms and formats. In a Web 2.0 context, in which writer and audience can virtually interact and participate (synchronously and asynchronously) in the social construction of knowledge making and knowledge distribution, the plural term *sequels* is apt indeed. This study investigates this peculiar moment – the change from literacy to post-literacy – to arrive at an understanding of how digital student writers compose and how they are influenced by the affordances of new media, including features directly correspondent with orality (e.g., rip, mix, remix, and burn) with respect to re-composition.

Notes

1. In "The Politics of the Interface," Cynthia J. Selfe and Richard L. Selfe (1994) advocate that a more critical and reflective use of computers in the classroom is warranted and not a "focus in overoptimistic ways on the positive contributions that technology can make in English composition classrooms" (p. 482). This is, they claim, "a new discursive territory" (p. 482).
2. Note that the example given enlists the iPod, the Apple brand.
3. Remix is defined extensively in the work of Geoffrey Sirc (2002), Alex Reid (2007), and Collin Gifford Brooke (2009).
4. Students repeatedly post reservations about writing on blogs. One student characterized this pressure this way: "So here I am at Hofstra, and I am blogging. Writing online makes me feel ... like I'm asking people to listen to my ideas. By putting out all of my thoughts onto the internet, its [*sic*] just a way for people to get their ideas across to you. When people blog its [*sic*] usually because they feel strongly about a point, where as [*sic*] I am blogging as an assignment for my class. I wonder if I'll get any comments on here, I kind of hope I don't unless their [*sic*] in support of whatever I'm writing." (Mike V. *Your Thoughts Here*. URL: http://mikeviscardi.blogspot.com/2009_10_01_archive.html [September 1, 2013].
5. This conflict about ownership and fair use deserves separate consideration, but will not be addressed in this investigation.

6. This notion that student bloggers both conceal and reveal themselves on their blogs is tied to their previous experiences in online communities. For example, the images students post to represent their writerly selves bear witness to both their extroversion and their introversion. Many choose to turn away from the camera's gaze; others obscure their identities by mirrors, curtains, or costumes; others hide in a group of friends. This phenomenon suggests student writers' ambivalence about their identity presentation. Moreover, this tentative quality suggests their awareness that writing on a blog is a kind of performance.
7. In many ways, these features of orality – additive, aggregative, redundant – are similar to the new media principle of modularity.
8. I am currently undertaking an extensive study of the incidence of binomial expressions (merisms, irreversible binomials, and doublets) in student writing in three formats: hand-written, in print, and blogged. The sample sets were drawn from writing completed at the end of the second semester of first-year composition instruction. The data suggests that doublets are most frequent in student writing on blogs, a fact that is consistent with the notion that students employ this rhetorical gesture as a way to provide choices for their readers.
9. There are even instances when the student blogger offers more than one doublet per sentence. The effect of so many rhetorical choices is dizzying, much like the fast-paced movement of other new media experiences (e.g., a mismanaged Prezi).
10. There are other useful categories of blog titles, whose usage includes those blog titles that directly address a reader (10%). Few overtly express their hesitancy to write or specifically to write online (7%). A few are deliberately obscure (7%). Very few blog titles are overwritten (4%). Student bloggers favour economy.

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