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## Digital (Dis)engagement: Politics, Technology, Writing

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· This article deals primarily with the issue(s) of student engagement  
· and technology by examining two YouTube videos, both posted  
· by professor of cultural anthropology Michael Wesch. A critical  
· examination of such texts is both academically revealing and  
· pedagogically useful. By foregrounding the complex interplay of  
· cultural attitudes towards technology, progress, and the purpose(s)  
· of education, scholars and teachers may fruitfully engage students  
· in both the critical study and composition of multi-modal texts. As  
· a gesture in that direction, I view the larger issue of public discourse  
· through the lens of Patricia Roberts-Miller's taxonomy of models of  
· the public sphere, and Jacques Ranciere's notion of the distribution of  
· the sensible.

### Introduction

**F**or many of us, I'm guessing, increasing numbers of our students are coming to college with new, different, and diverse kinds of literacies. By this I mean that text-messaging and Facebooking constitute a kind of literacy—one that is foreign to many of us. I think this because it finally struck me as shocking just how adept many students are at texting, and how inept I felt when I tried. With my old phone—and I was one of the last people I know to get a cell phone—I had to count as I tried to type, 1-2-3, 1-2-pause, 1-2-3, and it suddenly occurred to me that many young people (and some not so young) don't find texting all that challenging or cumbersome. We might debate whether this truly constitutes a "literacy," but it seems clear to me that many, if not most, students (at many institutions) are at least functionally literate in this



way—and notably much of this occurs in “public forums”—even if they are not, typically, critically literate in the ways we want them to be.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, new technologies, like composition textbooks, are developed (and sold) according to *marketing* strategies, not pedagogical ones. This means that too often technology, or an orientation towards technology, tends to drive pedagogy, rather than pedagogy driving technology. As Stuart Selber notes, “academic institutions are investing in technology infrastructure and support at an astonishing rate . . . [but] these investments are often driven by logics that fail to make humanistic perspectives a central concern”(1). In many of the writing classrooms at my own institution, it has become difficult, if not impossible, to use the dry-erase board due to its size and/or location, and instructors are forced to default to the LCD projection screen; in others, desktop space is dominated by computer equipment, so that students have little or no space for textbooks or writing paper.

It is not that I am opposed to the judicious and critical use of new technologies in the classroom—quite the opposite; but, like Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, for example, I want to begin with pedagogical questions: What are my goals? What specific tasks can help me to accomplish those goals? Is there a technology that can advance those goals more effectively? Is it truly an improvement? And at what cost? Jeffrey T. Grabill and Troy Hicks note that “[c]onversations in English and teacher education that originally centered on how to use technology

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1. As Barbara Warnick writes, “. . . critical literacy refers to the ability to stand back from texts and view them critically as circulating within a larger social and textual context. Critical literacy in part means communicating about communication. It includes the capacity to look beneath the surface of discourse, to understand implicit ideologies and agendas, to think and speak for oneself, to understand how social contexts affect how texts are designed and understood, and to appreciate the resources of cultural and linguistic diversity” (6).

See also Stuart Selber, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004), especially Chapter 3, and Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis’ collection *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (New York: Routledge, 2000).



quickly moved to questions about why; moreover, critical and more generative questions about how and why we should use technology are becoming the norm”(301). My sense, however, as a WPA at three different institutions over the last 12 years, is that this is far from the “norm” in the everyday practice of most writing instructors. And the question is rarely, if ever, *if* or *whether*. This is due in large part to pressures—internal and external, real and imagined, implied and inferred—from upper level administrators and “tech” contingents on campus, as well as the profession at large and colleagues in particular. As Selber writes, “the great majority of teachers . . . are encouraged, even mandated, to integrate technology into the curriculum, yet no incentives are given for such an ambitious assignment, one that places an extra workload burden on teachers”(2); moreover, “too few teachers today are prepared to organize learning environments that integrate technology meaningfully and appropriately”(1).

The use of new technology(s) for the sake of technology may also interfere with pedagogical goals, and, worse, actually support and reinforce notions (about education and/or writing) that run counter to those goals. For example, people in many quarters celebrate the development of plagiarism detection software as a boon. But if I use such software uncritically, I reinforce the notion that plagiarism is either a simple question of honesty (or deceit), or a simple technical problem, rather than a complicated cultural issue, one that is quite tangled up with competing social conventions (academic conventions of plagiarism do not apply, for example, to popular music) as well as the challenges of developing as a writer.

At the same time, most of our students are growing up, and reading and writing, in a world of new and quickly changing technologies. And it’s not just that technologies are changing, but that increasingly the world that we inhabit is mediated and self-referential, meaning that we experience “reality *through* something else,” through *representations* of reality, in fact (de Zengotita 8). In *Mediated: How the Media Shapes*



*Your World and the Way You Live in It*, Thomas de Zengotita makes this argument at length. We experience virtually nothing in an un-mediated way. Even if I were to go live in the woods, my experience of “nature” is mediated by the innumerable images and messages I’ve encountered previously. We may experience certain kinds of crises as unmediated—loss, death, grief—but even then, my experience of grief is mediated by the images and messages I’ve encountered, in innumerable films and T.V. shows. If we are to be effective in teaching the particular forms of literacy(s) we feel are important, we must understand and confront this context, both in our own theories and approaches to teaching writing, and in the classroom with our students.

Part of my argument here is a response to the culturally dominant notion that human communication is fundamentally *expressive*, which is to say *arhetorical*, or *anti-rhetorical*. By this I mean that one expresses oneself because one can. There is no need or effort to engage in critical dialogue or deliberation. Still less does one enter larger cultural or political conversations, in any effective way, or affect public policy; indeed, the notion that one can (or even should) is assumed to be non-sensical. (In U.S. “democracy,” one expresses one’s preference for leadership by voting; this is assumed to be the primary means of one’s participation in governance.) This is the cultural foundation for expressions such as and “it’s just entertainment” and “everyone’s entitled to their own opinion,”<sup>2</sup> among others.

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2. DeZengotita writes, “. . . consider this, drawn from research done by a seventeen-year-old senior on the origins of ethical relativism in lower grades: he gives a precocious ten-year-old Lawrence Kohlberg’s famous ‘you find a lot of money in a paper bag on the sidewalk what do you do?’ dilemma. The fifth grader decides (completely predictably, though he sees himself as defying convention) that it would be right for him to keep it, but, for another person, it might be right to take it to the police, for another, to donate it to charity—and, in general, that there are different rights and wrongs for different people and who can say more? In an inspired moment, the interviewing senior suggests maybe God? The fifth grader asserts his (again, completely predictable) agnosticism in magnanimous tones. He knows that the weak and ignorant somewhere out in the boondocks might find his enlightened views unbearable. But he is willing to entertain the hypothesis that God exists and acknowledges that, if He does, ‘God could have a different opinion from mine’”(76).



This notion of the expressive function of public discourse is ubiquitous, and coupled with “ethical relativism. De Zengotita describes a philosophy class in which a senior claimed to be “conceiving of a square circle”:

Other students were skeptical, but they would not categorically deny that he was thinking of what he said he was thinking of. They weren’t entitled to tell him what was in his own mind. They wouldn’t want anyone telling them what they were thinking.

Which leads to how ready most kids are to assent to solipsism, the ultimate form of relativism, in philosophical discussion. The idea that everyone has their own reality, constituted by their own experiences and perceptions, comes almost automatically. *It feels like common sense*. And for good reason. The everyday MeWorld [sic] they are constructing out of all the representational options that surround them reflects their own tastes and judgments back at them constantly.” (77-78; emphasis added)

In the realm of public discourse, such cultural attitudes—linking ethical relativism with freedom of expression—have wide ranging effects. In *Vernacular Voices*, Gerard Hauser questions dominant notions of “the public” and “the view of public opinion that currently pervades modern politics and media coverage of it in advanced industrial societies”(4). As an instructive example, Hauser describes CNN’s efforts to “tap . . . public reactions” to the first presidential debate of 1992: “a panel of viewers located across the country was to be connected via telephone to a computer in Omaha. As they listened to the candidates, each was to tap appropriate keys on his or her touch-tone phone to register a positive or negative reaction to what was being heard. The computer-results then would be transmitted to CNN in Atlanta where graphs would visually display the changing reception each candidate received as the debate progressed” (2). Referring to these “tappers” as a “Baudrillardian simulacrum,” Hauser is worth quoting at length here:



A monologue of reports and discussions that derive their understanding about society's activity from opinion polls conditions our consciousness of what the press and politicians refer to as 'the public.' We encounter this public as a faceless, anonymous body whose members are reduced to the percentage having selected predetermined choices to a pollster's questions and who enter our homes as media reports of data. The paradigm of public opinion entailed by CNN's 'tappers,' along with its implicit devaluing of opinion as a discursive formation, creates the impression of 'the public' as an anonymous assemblage given to volatile mood swings likely to dissipate into apathy and from which we personally are disengaged.

This abstract portrayal contributes to our sense of disjunction from the public it reports. Most individuals understand their speaking and writing as personal expression. Few of us are called upon to address an audience, and even fewer do so as a spokesperson for a group or cause. Most of our communication directed at persons or groups has some immediacy, and we know them in some way. We experience our transactions with them in concrete terms as addressed discourse: our own thoughts, our intended message, a specific audience to which we have adapted, and that audience's perceived response. The public portrayed by the media, in contrast, is an abstract representation whose needs, thoughts, and responses are extrapolated from survey data. We do not experience this public; we cannot interact with it, question its reasoning, or expect it to respond to our own reasoning.(4-5)

One aspect of the fallout of these cultural attitudes toward public discourse, which is linked to changes in literacy practices, might be what many of us view as a lack of student engagement. The lack of student engagement with education is by-product or corollary of a general lack of engagement with politics. Or, at least, they may be described in similar terms. De Zengotita writes, "As political activity becomes the production of representations, the dynamic of commerce is reproduced



in politics. Because political representations must contend with clutter, they must be packaged in a certain way, they must grab the most attention possible in the least amount of time and get across some simple message” (133-34). Moreover:

Kids today have been subjected to thousands and thousands of high-impact images of misery and injustice in every corner of the globe before they are old enough to drive. The producers of these images compete with each other to arouse as much horror and pity and outrage as possible, hoping that this encounter with a person dying of AIDS or that documentary about sweatshop labor or these photographs of recently skinned baby seals will mobilize commitment. But what the cumulative experience has actually mobilized, in the majority, is that characteristic ironic distance that aging activists mistook for apathy. But it wasn’t apathy as much as it was psychological numbness, a general defense against representational intrusions of all kinds—especially painful ones. . . .

As politics came to be about expressing identity, it couldn’t compete with other identity-defining venues in popular culture. . . . How much more satisfying to belong to Hip-Hop Nation than to some dowdy civil rights organization? How much more fun to go to parties with all your clever friends and watch *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* makeovers on TV than to join a conclave of relentlessly earnest Episcopalians stuffing envelopes on behalf of a gay bishop?

So political ‘apathy’ took hold because political representations were boring—when they weren’t painful. (135-36)

While I have no reason to believe the problem of student engagement is actually any worse than it has been in the past, certainly, at best, it is an on-going concern. One part of that concern relates to students’ reasons, or motivations, for seeking a college degree, which is, in my view, related to cultural notions about the purpose of education. Here, however, I want to note what I see as one of the major problems for students today, which is a simple inability to focus on *anything* for an extended period of time.



This phenomenon is aptly illustrated in a lecture delivered by Philip Zimbardo, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Stanford, for the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA). This lecture, “The Secret Powers of Time,” in addition to being posted to the RSA’s own website, is now available on YouTube; the RSA’s “RSA Animate” series, which “puts witty animation to the narration from our speakers’ presentations” (<http://www.thersa.org/>) has likewise found its way to YouTube as well as a variety of other websites. Remarking on today’s young people, Zimbardo points out, “By the time he’s 21, a boy has spent 10,000 hours playing video games.” This means, he says, “they live in a world that they create . . . Their brains are being digitally rewired, which means they will never fit in a traditional classroom, which is analog.” Because they sit “passively” and “control nothing,” the traditional classroom is “boring.”<sup>3</sup>

While we may view this as an unwarranted over-generalization, and I do disagree with the implication that we must make the classroom digital, the point is worth considering. Understanding students’ literacy practices (texting, IMing, social networking, tweeting) may help us understand why it’s a real struggle for many students just to read a whole book, or even just a chapter, or to write an entire essay. A year ago, when I assigned just the first chapter (“Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress”) of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-the present*, the first comment I received from a student was, “It was long.” More recently, I had a student explain to me that she had somehow to stretch to *two* whole pages an assignment on *Hamlet*.

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3 We could, of course, problematize Zimbardo’s talk in any number of ways (not the least of which are gender issues), which is precisely what I would suggest we do, with our students, in the classroom. For now, however, I suggest only that his ideas can help us to think about how and why students are not always engaged with their own educations, or their own writing, in the ways we’d like them to be.



## I

One of the most urgent, and puzzling, questions facing the liberal arts, and composition instruction in particular, then, is how can we get students to *desire* learning, to *want* to write—to see human communication as fundamentally rhetorical and, ultimately, meaningful, rather than as merely expressive? (This is not to say that language is not and cannot be expressive in certain contexts, nor that the expressive is necessarily less important. But the expressive functions of language do not require adherence to a set of social conventions in order to function; they usually *do* adhere to a set of conventions, but those conventions are not crucial to such functions of language.) There are, of course, many answers to my question, and I mean here to suggest one answer, not necessarily *the* answer. But my position presupposes, at least, the following: that education is political;<sup>4</sup> that the politics of education can and should be made explicit in the writing classroom; that public writing of some sort should be at least part of the writing curriculum; and that such writing can and sometimes should be linked to community engagement (service, experiential, or “immersive” learning).

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4 Stanley Fish’s book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, is based on one simple premise: that “teaching” and “politics” are two distinctly separate tasks, and that we, as teachers, should stick to what we were hired to do, which is teach. If we want to “do politics” on our own time, fine. But keep it out of the classroom. This is not to say, according to Fish, that we can’t discuss political topics. Nor does he propose “equal time” for opposing views of controversial topics. Any topic is potentially acceptable, so long as it remains an object of critical analysis, and not a means to persuade students to believe x or agree with y. Thus the choice of political topics made (or not made) by an instructor is not, in his view, political, nor is the perspective one brings, the way in which the topic is approached, or the way(s) in which discussion is allowed to proceed.

Fish acknowledges that there is a politics to education, but limits that politics to “university politics,” which is not suitable material for the classrooms; university politics, apparently, is something that doesn’t or shouldn’t concern students. Moreover, the notion that the system of education was and is political, in its formation and forms, that it is shaped and influenced by political and cultural forces from outside the university, escapes him, despite the fact that he himself is responding to political attacks from outside the university, and as if, just for example, legislative decisions about funding don’t affect or concern us.



The *YouTube* video “Web 2.0 . . . The Machine is Us/ing Us”—created by Michael Wesch, a professor of Cultural Anthropology at Kansas State, and released on January 31, 2007—was an instant, and huge, phenomenon. Wesch later wrote in his *Digital Ethnography* blog (<http://mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg/>):

On January 31st I released the 2nd draft of The Machine is Us/ing Us hoping to receive feedback from my colleagues. (The first draft was only seen by my Digital Ethnography class 2 days before the 2nd draft was released on *YouTube*.) I sent it to 10 people. Four days later it was the most blogged about video in the blogosphere and the wild ride had begun. It has been fun and amazing for the most part - sometimes overwhelming - but always exciting. It is hard to believe that a little video I created in my basement in St. George Kansas could be seen by over 1.7 million people, be translated into (at least) 5 languages, and be shown to large audiences at major conferences on 6 continents within just one month of its creation.<sup>5</sup>

The title implies a tension between control and being controlled, but that tension is not borne out in the video. The tone is hopeful, optimistic, excited: “Who will organize all of this data? We will. You will.” While form and content were “inseparable” in HTML, “Digital Text can do better”—“With form separated from content, users did not need to know complicated code to upload content to the web.” The problematic separation of form and content is easily accomplished and celebrated as a boon; anyone, anywhere, can enter the blogosphere, without the restrictions of knowing how to create the forms—the creation of a blog, for example, is a simple matter. Just point and click. But there is no exploration of the restrictions imposed, of the ways in which the form(s) provided restrict and structure the blog, or even of what a “blog” means or does.

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5 The reader is encouraged to view the video now at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE>, or search YouTube for “Web 2.0.”



The fact is that by surfing the web, we *are* structuring the information, whether we intend to or not, whether we bring a critical perspective to how and what. What are the consequences of this approach to literacy(s) and to public discourse? What does it mean to adopt a point-and-click attitude toward social, economic, and political problems such as immigration, unemployment, homelessness, healthcare, and war? (One example might be the state of Arizona's most recent attempts to address the "immigration problem.") Moreover, the simplicity of creating a blog, for example, encourages belief in the self-expressive functions of public discourse. These remarks, however, are intended not so much as a criticism of Wesch, but *as a point of entry into discussion with our students*.

Just months after releasing "Web 2.0: The Machine is Us/ing Us," Wesch released a second video on YouTube, this one the collaborative effort of 200 students in his Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course. "A Vision of Students Today" quickly became "one of the most blogged about video[s] in the blogosphere for several weeks" (Wesch, *Digital Ethnography* blog, [www.mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg](http://www.mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg)).<sup>6</sup>

There's a lot going on in this video, much of it encouraging. But several things in particular interest me: There's a critique of technology and of education in general: "If students learn what they do . . . what are they learning sitting here?" "18% of my teachers . . . know my name." "My average class size is 115." There's also the recognition and admission that students are not engaged with education: "I buy hundred dollar textbooks that I never open." "My neighbor paid for class but never comes." "I Facebook through most of my classes."

What is most interesting, however, is that the video is largely self-referential—"I will be \$20,000 in debt after graduation," "I get 7 hours of sleep each night," "I am a multi-tasker . . . I have to be"—yet somewhere

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6 The reader is encouraged to view the video now at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGCJ46vyR9o>, or search YouTube for "A Vision of Students Today."



in the middle there is a shift towards the social and political. There's the acknowledgement that even at \$20,000 in debt, "I'm one of the lucky ones;" "This laptop costs more than some people in the world make in a year;" "Over 1 billion people . . . make less than \$1 a day." There's an awareness that filling out scantron exams won't help students deal with pollution, inequality, health care, war, poverty, disease, ethnic conflict, or world hunger.

Even so, in the end, the critique of technology in/and education is all about "me": "I did not create the problems . . . but they are my problems;" "when I graduate, I will probably have a job . . . that doesn't exist today," and filling out those scantron exams "won't help me get there."

Wesch later referred to this video as a "disheartening portrayal of student disengagement," despite the fact that *the students* made the video. 200 students collaborated to do the research, writing, and composing. We are apt, as with so many other things, to think of this in terms of video production—certainly that is what students, upper administration, and the culture is likely to both see and value. But as an exercise in *writing, rhetoric, and composition*, "A Vision of Students Today" constitutes a telling cultural artifact—one which gives us interesting ways of thinking about writing in a digital era, as well as a useful pedagogical tool—one that can provoke students, in combination with other types of texts, into thinking and talking about writing (and texting, and Facebooking) in complex ways. As such, the shift to the political—situated as it is within the complex interplay of a self-referential "I," education, and technology(s)—provides a point of inquiry, a gateway to discussion, research, and writing.

As both cultural artifacts and pedagogical tools, then, Wesch's videos should be situated in important overlapping contexts:



First, competing views of the function of education in general, and of writing instruction in particular—as mechanical or technical training for the material success of students, corporations, and nations; as a liberal endeavor interested in creating “well-rounded” individuals;<sup>7</sup> as a humanistic enterprise more concerned with addressing larger social ills and political problems. It strikes me as increasingly urgent that we take this up as a point of discussion with students. One of the questions we should be asking ourselves and them is What are the responsibilities of an educated person?

Second, the related and contradictory impulses of technological “progress,” captured nicely, if unintentionally, in an old Apple commercial, which Wesch posted to his blog. The ad asks: “What would you do to change the world?” The answers, voiced by children from around the world: “End hunger,” “Everyone gets a house,” “Teach people to read.” We have a more recent example in the “I’m a PC”/“I’m an IBMer” commercials (ironically a response to the Mac v. PC marketing campaign). The message of these commercials is clear: save the world by buying our product, by being a good capitalist consumer, and contributing to the material success of national and international corporations; moreover, the path of progress is via technology, and

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7 Robert E. Cummings sums this perspective up nicely: “The traditional role of academics is to prepare students for contemporary society through a broad liberal arts curriculum. We teach pure mathematics, comparison-and-contrast essay writing, Latin grammar, and sculpture not because our graduates will be asked to write integrals that allow the comparison, in Latin, of the relative merits of two sculptures, and not only because these activities do indeed have some residual cultural capital, but because they teach our students how to think. If the advent of Wikipedia marks a change in the future world in which our students will work, a liberal arts curriculum provides the best strategy for preparing them for it. Unlike a technical preparation, which relies on the specifics of contemporary tools, a liberal arts preparation does not base its curriculum on the particulars of the current technology but provides the training to evaluate any particular instance of technology by understanding how it affects knowledge creation itself”(2). While this view—which is true as far as it goes—provides a logical justification for liberal arts education, like justification for technical training, it is based on the assumption that the purpose of education is to prepare the individual to work (and/or live) in the world.



inevitably leads to happiness.<sup>8</sup> In the larger cultural conversation about technology(s) (and public discourse), you can save the world by “broadcasting *yourself*,” which is to say, without taking a meaningful place in democratic conversation.

## II

It is, in my view, the culturally dominant view of the purpose(s) of education—primarily as a path to the individual’s “success,” which is usually linked to class status—that accounts for much of what Wesch calls student “disengagement” with learning (and, of course, with writing in particular). Teachers of writing can and should usefully address such disengagement by foregrounding this complex intersection of writing and digital literacies, of cultural, political, and educational issues, and by inviting students to participate in those digital environments. In doing so, we might engage students in serious conversations about competing views of the purposes of education, as well as the purposes of writing, and, especially, of argumentation.

And that means not just assigning “public writing,” but making the practices and competing views of argumentation in public discourse the subject of inquiry. In order to do this, I’d like first to draw on the work of French theorist Jacques Rancière, and link that work to Patricia Roberts-Miller’s discussion of the public sphere in *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*.

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8 “Among scholars who have studied public discourse on and about new communication media, some have identified its rhetorical attributes, and in particular the narrative that threads together public beliefs about technology. Selfe (1999) and McChesney (1999) noted that the major elements of this narrative are faith in science, emphasis on U.S. preeminence, and reliance on unregulated market forces as a solution to most of the world’s economic problems. Selfe argued that this narrative grows out of modernism’s view that science and technology, grounded as they are in systematic observation, rigor, and technological tools, will yield a better world for the human species” (Barbara Warnick, *Critical Literacy in a Digital Era* 8).



In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière defines “the distribution of the sensible” as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it”(12); and “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time”(13). In his review of Rancière’s more recent book, *The Future of the Image*, Robert Porter explains that, in Rancière’s view, “politics emerges through the formation of a mode of subjectivity that begins to speak for itself, through a call to be heard and seen in public space. Politics, then, is . . . the disruption of the hitherto constituted political order . . . by a subject who emerges and demands a role and a part to play in a reconfigured public sphere” (Porter 17). The politics of maintaining order “precipitates a depoliticization of the public sphere” (17), which can be challenged only by the politics of disruption. According to Rancière, such disruption has “aesthetics at its core to the extent that it can bring about a redistribution of the sensible, a shift in public consciousness concerning how we see, what is seen, who can legitimately say this is what is seen,” etc. (Porter 17).<sup>9</sup>

The depoliticization of the public sphere functions, conversely, to constrain, dilute, and deflect the discourse of disruption. One of the ways in which it does this is by offering the illusion of participation while emphasizing the politics of self-referential, expressive discourse. Moreover, it seems to underlie many of my students’ struggles with writing. Many students have difficulty writing because they have no real sense of audience, at least of an audience that matters. That is, even if they can define an audience, they can’t really imagine a *purpose* for writing to that audience. There’s no reason to write, no reason to argue or deliberate, other than to express oneself and, sometimes, to “win.”

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9 The relationship between aesthetics and rhetoric(s) is a discussion for another time. Here, let me point out only that it seems to me, in Rancière’s formulation, aesthetics (art, literature, film) are understood to function rhetorically (whether intentionally so or not), and that therefore the function of aesthetics is grounded in a theory of rhetoric.



I suspect that part of the reason for this is that so much of the public discourse they regularly encounter utterly ignores considerations of audience, or constructs “The Public” in a way that distances and alienates most individuals.

I’m reminded of Ira Shor’s remarks in *Empowering Education*: “Students come of age in a society where average people do not participate in governance, in framing major purposes, in making policy, or in having a strong voice in media and public affairs. Banks do not hold elections on their investments or credit policies”(19), and so on. Shor, writing in 1992, goes on to quote Michael Apple (from 1979): “To many people, the very idea of regaining any real control over social institutions and personal development is abstract and ‘non-sensical.’ In general . . . many people do see society’s economic, social and educational institutions as basically self-directing, with little necessity for them to communicate and argue over the ends and means of these same institutions”(qtd. in Shor 19; emphasis added). These observations seem no less astute to me in 2010. In many ways, the developments of new technologies have exacerbated the issue, in this way: The Politics of Maintaining Control normalize a dysfunctional, apolitical public sphere, one in which argumentation is reduced to the expression of one’s “opinion,” and the responsibility of the rhetor is reduced to making persuasive arguments, irrespective of anything that might be considered true or real or ethical, as problematic as those concepts might be in a postmodern context. In addition, as W. Michele Simmons and Jeffrey Grabill observe:

ordinary people are often inhibited from participating in decisions that affect their lives because they lack the “technical expertise, authority . . . and status” needed to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Young, “Justice” 56-57). Participation requires that citizens also have an understanding of complex issues in order to articulate their experiences and participate in public conversation and offer valuable contributions to any decision. But the requirements for ethical and effective public deliberation must



confront a set of what Asen calls “indirect exclusions.” Indirect exclusions “function tacitly through discursive norms and practices that prescribe particular ways of interacting in public forums”(Asen 345). (1)

What is really at issue, then, are competing views, or models, of the public sphere. In *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*, Patricia Roberts-Miller is concerned primarily with debates over the teaching of argumentation within composition circles. “[M]uch of our disagreement about pedagogical practices,” she writes, “is disagreement about what it means (or should mean) to participate in a democratic public sphere” (4). The fact is we tend to assume a single model, which Roberts-Miller identifies as the liberal model, “grounded in Enlightenment values of civility, rationality, neutrality, and autonomy” (18). There are, of course, other models, among them the technocratic, which “assumes that policy questions are fundamentally technical questions” best solved by “experts”(4); and the interest-based model, which “assumes that people can and should look to their own self-interest in regard to public policies; the conflict among them should not be settled through argument as much as through bargaining, relying on market forces, and/or advertising” (5); there are also agonistic, communitarian, and deliberative models.

But what kind of public sphere(s) actually exists in practice? What kind of public sphere(s) do we want? And what kind of public sphere are we preparing or asking students to participate in? It would be wrong, of course, to claim “the” public sphere is a single model; it has been well-remarked—by Gerard Hauser and Nancy Fraser, among others—that there are multiple publics. Even so, I maintain that there is a public sphere, which is more properly understood as a *network* comprised of an almost infinite number of publics, each itself a network, or subsystem.

The fact that these multiple publics are distinguishable should not mask the fact that they are interconnected and therefore part of a larger system.



Their interconnectedness, however, should not mask the fact that some subsystems are critical, some less so, some not at all. Those subsystems that are critical define an arena one might call “mainstream”: major newspapers and magazines, the nightly news (local and national), major network television and some cable stations; in addition to these, those sources—like the White House, the Pentagon, the major Think Tanks—that provide “information” to them. Other subsystems are less critical; they enter the mainstream periodically, and not always without effect—investigative journalism sometimes, and often documentary film, and some of the less significant cable stations. Still other subsystems function almost entirely outside of the mainstream. They are generally peripheral, and rarely make their presence felt within the mainstream networks; these are the news sources, web communities, and blogs that have been generated by political progressives.<sup>10</sup> They have high significance for the members of their communities, but little, if any, impact on public policy or mainstream ideas, at least in an immediate sense.

These public networks function according to a variety of models of the public sphere. Importantly, however, the dominant or mainstream networks may invoke the model which best serves its purpose(s) at a given time in a given context. Moreover, there are few truly deliberative or communitarian models, and none that I know of that have any presence in or impact on the mainstream networks. The important point, I think, is as Roberts-Miller writes, “composition studies could be enriched by paying closer attention to differences among models of the public sphere,” and “we would do well to make the nature of such participation the subject of deliberative conflict”(4). Thus I argue that simply assigning public writing is not enough. Too much public writing is what Susan Wells has called “generic”:

In such assignments, students inscribe their positions in a vacuum: since there is no place within the culture where student writing on

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10 It may be argued that these subsystems are comprised of networks considered “radical” on both the left and the right; I would disagree. The “radical” rightwing regularly impacts and infects mainstream discourse and public policy.



gun control is held to be of general interest, no matter how persuasive the student, or how intimate their acquaintance with guns, “public writing” in such a context means “writing for no audience at all” (328; qtd. in Roberts-Miller 1).

This is a formalistic approach to public discourse. Roberts-Miller remarks, “In what model of politics, the self, and knowledge does that formalistic approach to public writing make sense? My answer is that it is transparently sensible in the liberal model of the public sphere, and that the liberal model is not the only model available”(2). In a liberal model of the public sphere, in writing for no audience at all, the emphasis is soundly on self-expression. There is, simply, no other point.

Of course, as Roberts-Miller also writes, “To raise the issue of imagining our students as citizens is to invoke the specter of the ‘politicized’ classroom, the hobgoblin of attacks on academia. The politicized classroom debate, while often apparently about pedagogy . . . is a conflict about the very nature of democratic discourse (and, to some degree, whether we want a democracy at all)”(10). Noting the contradictions in Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals*, Roberts-Miller writes:

Of most importance for this project is that he says that tenured radicals should be condemned for thinking of education as political at the same time that he repeatedly asserts that there are political consequences to educational practice. . . . This argument (with its apparently contradictory premise) continually comes up in regard to critical pedagogy. Maxine Hairston, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Jeff Smith, and other critics of liberatory pedagogy advocate a practice supposed to be apolitical at the same time that they claim political benefits for such practices . . . . To dismiss this argument because of the contradiction is to miss the fact that the distinction between a politics of an avowedly disinterested inculcation of certain skills (critical reading, clear writing, logical reasoning) and an openly impassioned advocacy of certain policy arguments *seems obvious*



to many people. It seems so because the liberal public sphere—especially in its most popular forms—depends upon and reinforces the dichotomies that make *sensible* the notion of an apolitical grounding for politics. (11; emphasis added)

Thus, the “politicized” classroom—itself a construct of those who get to define the terms of debate—functions as a piece in a polemical chess match that reinscribes “common sense”: in this case, that we must choose between political (pedagogy) and not; but in a larger, deeper sense, too, that the function of public discourse is fundamentally expressive—that, like YouTube and Madonna, we should encourage students only to express themselves. If we are to fruitfully address the multiple layers of complex issues facing education in general and writing instruction in particular—student disengagement, the purpose(s) of education, concepts of progress and the evolution of technology(s), and the impact of those technologies on human communication—then we must situate public, student writing within those contexts, foregrounding “the nature of [democratic] participation,” as Roberts-Miller suggests. In short, we must redefine the “sensible.”



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