CHAPTER 16

INTELLECTUAL, ARGUMENTATIVE, AND INFORMATIONAL AFFORDANCES OF PUBLIC FORUMS: POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO ACADEMIC LEARNING

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In a case study, Amber Buck (2012) described the literacy practices of Ronnie, an undergraduate student at a large midwestern university. Through multiple sources of data, including a time-use diary, interviews, and a profile tour of Ronnie's social network sites, Buck painstakingly documented what Paul Prior and Jody Shipka (2003) called the "chronotopic laminations" of his literate practices—the "dispersed and fluid places, times, people, and artifacts that are tied together in literate action" (p. 181). As Buck (2012) showed, Ronnie's online activity is "intricately woven into the tapestry of his daily literacy practices" and plays a "large role in how he interacts with others in his personal and professional life as well as how he presents himself to different audiences" (pp. 9-10).

Ronnie's practices are by no means unique. They resemble those of students on and off campuses across the United States and around the world. In "Writing in the 21ˢᵗ Century," Yancey (2009) pointed out that because of digital technology

> writers are *everywhere*—on bulletin boards and in chat rooms and in emails and in text messages and on blogs. . . . Such writing is what Deborah Brandt has called self-sponsored writing: a writing that belongs to the writer, not to an institution, with the result that people—students, senior citizens, employees, volunteers, family members, sensible *and* non-sensible people alike—want to compose and do—on the page and on the screen and on the network—to *each other*. (p. 4, emphasis in original)

For Kevin Roozen (2009) and other scholars, these "vernacular literacies" represent "informally learned activities, rooted in everyday experience and serv[ing] everyday purposes" (as cited in Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 251).

Yet critics and academics alike continue to level harsh criticisms against students' online interactions, particularly their use of social media, claiming that it strips away imagination and creative uses of language (Pacheco, 2012), "degrades" writing ability (Hansen, 2013), and sends essay skills "down the plug hole" (Henry, 2013). Typical concerns include the fragmentation of attention, the invasion of "text speak" and other linguistic features of Internet-based writing into academic papers, and the effects of fast, brief online writing on students' ability to frame and sustain arguments. Franzen (2013) bemoaned technology's promotion of "intolerably shallow forms of social engagement" and asked what will happen to people who "want to communicate in depth, individual to individual, in the quiet and permanence of the printed word." Similarly, texting is said to be "pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; [and] raping our vocabulary" (Humphrys, 2007). Yet these claims remain unsupported by formal research and are not even based on careful descriptive inquiry into the nature and contexts of the public writing in which students are engaged online.

This chapter argues that self-sponsored, digitally mediated literate activities can provide forms of tacit learning—especially about discourse—that mirror the learning encouraged and expected in school. However, academic and self-sponsored writing are often thought to exist in different worlds. Students don't see many relationships between their online self-sponsored writing and their papers and other academic work (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008), and teachers are reluctant to bring students' personal use of technology into the classroom (Levin, Arafeh, Lenhart, & Rainie, 2002). But keeping these two worlds of literate practices apart may be unwise. As Stephanie Vie (2008) has argued, intentionally and carefully bridging the two domains, both in foundational writing courses and in courses across the curriculum, may strengthen students' learning, foster more conscious rhetorical awareness, teach them skills of reasonable civic participation, and facilitate the transfer of discursive ability across diverse communities of practice.

ACADEMIC AND SELF-SPONSORED WRITING: HOW MUCH?

Unless they liked to keep diaries or write poems and stories, few young people engaged in self-sponsored writing before the advent of the Internet. Thompson (2009) went so far as to claim that "most Americans never wrote anything, ever, that wasn't a school assignment" (para. 5). Kathleen Blake Yancey (2009) ex-

plained that before the Internet, the association of writing with hard work and difficulty, with school testing, even with penmanship, pushed all but the most literarily inclined students away from self-sponsored writing. However, almost half of today's parents believe that their teenage children write more than they did at the same age, and another 20 percent say they write at least as much (Pew, 2014).

The importance of schooling for the advancement of written literacy is indisputable. Yet the quantity of writing students produce in school does not appear to have increased significantly over the past decades. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from both 2007 and 2011 show that high school students write little in school. In 2007, between 70 percent and 90 percent of high school seniors wrote common school genres somewhere between never and once a month (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The 2011 NAEP data show that 82 percent of seniors wrote between zero and three pages per week in language arts classes; almost 40 percent wrote one page or less (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Large course loads, underfunding, lack of teacher development, and the association of writing with standardized testing all militate against assigning and responding thoughtfully to acceptable amounts of purposeful writing in the schools.

Although they may be less extensive, data from higher education point in the same direction. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, which is administered to over 700 U.S. four-year colleges and universities each year, in 2014 and 2015, 76 percent of first-year students reported writing no papers longer than 10 pages; another 19 percent reported writing one or two such papers during the current year (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). Seniors did not fare much better: 41 percent reported writing no papers longer than 11 pages; another 34 percent reported writing one or two such papers (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). The median for the number of pages written in the first year is 69 (less than one page a week, assuming a five-course load) and 109 for seniors (not much more than one page a week) (R. M. Gonyea, personal communication, 2015). Fewer than half of all students take a course in which they must write more than 20 pages during the semester (Arum & Roska, 2011). Results from the 2014 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) show that in most lower-division courses, 80 to 90 percent of faculty members assign no papers of more than 10 pages (Indiana University, 2014). The data reporting the number of shorter papers, while more substantial, still leave much to be desired (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). Of course, length and amount of writing alone do not always correlate with improved writing experiences (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine, 2015); much depends on the nature and quality of

assignments and how they are used in the course. However, a national study of 2,101 assignments across the curricula of 100 U.S. postsecondary institutions also documents the lack of systematic attention to audiences and purposes beyond the teacher playing the role of an examiner (Melzer, 2014). Problematic assumptions about writing continue to work against its richer and more principled integration into all courses and curricula: it's the responsibility of composition teachers; it intrudes on "coverage" of the material; its grading takes too much time away from research and other responsibilities; or it's not highly relevant to the learning of a content area (math, physics, chemistry, etc.). In spite of the continued development of writing-across-the-curriculum programs (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), no evidence suggests a nationwide increase in student writing in higher education. In addition, research suggests that teachers infrequently incorporate new communication technologies into the classroom (beyond visual display such as PowerPoint or occasional discussion forums), which further limits their exposure to the relationship between writing and other media.

But a lack of purposeful writing is no longer the case in students' personal lives. The amount of writing students are now doing outside of academic settings approaches or exceeds what they do in school. Researchers at Stanford University collected every piece of writing produced by a random sample of 189 students over five years, yielding over 14,000 texts (Keller, 2009). The study showed that students were "deeply engaged" with their self-sponsored writing: "For these students, extracurricular writing is very important, often more important than any of the writing they are doing for classes" (Lunsford, 2007, p. 3). Students were generally less enthusiastic about their academic writing because it lacked purpose and wasn't instrumental. In contrast, their self-sponsored writing often had specific goals such as keeping a group organized or doing something political. Likewise, a recent study of ten undergraduates found fewer instances of audience awareness and fewer writing decisions based on audience concerns when students talked about their academic writing than when they talked about their self-sponsored writing (Rosinski, 2016).

Other research corroborates these findings. In a study at Michigan State University, a group of students was asked to record everything they wrote during a two-week period (blogging, texting, academic papers, etc.), noting time, genre, audience, location, and purpose. In their diaries and in the researchers' interviews, students described their nonacademic and socially driven writing "as more persistent and meaningful to them than their in-class work" (Keller, 2009). Likewise, a recent Pew study (2014) revealed that "the vast majority of teens have eagerly embraced written communication with their peers as they share messages on their social network pages, in emails and instant

messages online"; 93 percent of teens surveyed said they frequently write for their own pleasure (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008, p. i).

Students' engagement in self-sponsored writing clearly emerges from the massive growth of the Internet and the ubiquity of digital devices for participating in every imaginable form of interaction. The Internet has afforded the unprecedented growth of writing across multiple platforms, in hundreds of emerging genres, among hundreds of millions of users worldwide, and in rapidly multiplying communities and activities such as buying, selling, and trading; sharing hobbies or special interests; or discussing issues in dozens of domains such as health, the law, politics, and education. Facebook now has 1.23 billion daily active users and 1.15 billion daily active mobile users; 1.86 billion people use the site at least once a month. Among those aged 12-17, almost three in four (73%) use the site ("Company Info," 2016). People aged 18-24 send and receive an average of 3,853 texts per month, or 128 per day (TextRequest, 2017). Meanwhile, additional forms of chat, such as WhatsApp and BBM, may cut into the number of text messages while simultaneously creating net gains in overall messaging (Crocker, 2013; Kalinchuk, 2013). The Radicati Group reported that there were 4.92 billion email accounts worldwide in 2017, and that number is expected to increase by 7 percent yearly through 2019 (Radicati Group, 2017). Website hosting and interaction is equally robust. On WordPress (just one of hundreds of Web hosting sites), 409 million people currently view over 24.6 billion pages per month, and users write 87.6 million new posts and nearly 44.6 million new comments per month (WordPress, 2017).

SWITCHING LENSES: A SOCIAL PRACTICES VIEW OF LITERATE ACTIVITY

If we view our students' participation in this prodigious textual activity through our usual academic lens, the result sometimes looks like so much digital waste, an effluence of emotion-laden responses, name-calling, and vapid status updates, as suggested in just three (of 9,506,164) YouTube posts responding to a news report about a whale crashing into a South African couple's sailboat because they were pursuing it too closely:

> michael: what the hell who gives the damn about a whale and the boat
>
> gorrilaboy22: lol this whale forgot his life jacket.
>
> Sputnikmedia: why does everybody name their boats intrepid LOL

Such activity looks quite different, however, if we take what the New London Group and other scholars call a "social practices" or "learning ecology" orientation to literacy (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993; see also Hull & Schultz, 2001). Based on sociocultural activity theories and theories of situated discourse, this orientation sees learning not just in terms of the minds of individuals but these individuals' relationship to contexts and to other people. Learning "derives from participation in joint activities, is inextricably tied to social practices, and is mediated by artifacts over time" (Greenhow, 2013, p. 20; see also Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). This orientation breaks down traditional hierarchies that place some forms of writing above others. Tweets, truncated and constrained, play multiple rhetorical, informational, and social roles across vast digital landscapes. Responses on forums or blogs, as well as text messages do the same. All writing is equal in the sense that it serves particular social, informational, and rhetorical purposes as a function of a community's needs and interests. But if we look below its surface structure features, it also reflects deeper meta-level processes, such as negotiating face, or making and defending persuasive claims, or extending a community's knowledge.

Most publicly available sites create their own self-defined audiences, some relatively stable and coherent, others wildly fluctuating and fleeting. Among the former are fan sites for sports teams, constantly visited by more enduring and loyal audiences to get updates and to carry on conversations. Among the latter are sites such as YouTube, where audiences flock momentarily and virally to videos, often because links are posted on other sites such as Facebook. Many users may view a single video only once and some will post a comment; the result is a multimedia blend of visual and textual elements.

Consider Purplepride.org, a fan site for the Minnesota Vikings NFL football team. The website includes news, photos, audio and video clips, team and game day information, and links to a series of forums (with archives) on various topics related to football. The most central of these is the "Vikings Fans Forum," which at this writing has almost 500,000 posts and 21,184 threads. Total posts to the site, which has 11,535 members, exceed 1,102,000. While middle or high school students are working hard to learn argumentative strategies in often banal, purposeless assignments, here they might practice those strategies tacitly in their self-sponsored writing. The style and register of the exchanges is clearly nonacademic, with abbreviations, informal lexis, and oral features similar to online chats or text messages. Looking into the "deep structures" of the exchanges, however, we can see evidence of argumentative properties students are expected to use in academic work. Although many discussions resemble what Nancy L. Stein and Christopher A. Miller (1990) called "social argument" (the kind experienced in every household when issues or ac-

tions must be debated), participants are still strategically supporting particular positions. In fact, members of this and similar forums often demand support for claims more vehemently than do many teachers. To facilitate dialog and interaction, participants also must learn to concede to opposing views, reason from logic, and share and negotiate information requiring skills of numeracy, historical accuracy, and prediction.

Strictly speaking, such forums are not social networking sites, which are usually defined as

> web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd & Ellison, 2007)

But to investigate the effects of students' self-sponsored online activities on their academic learning, it's essential to expand and re-theorize the nature of the social beyond such bounded and profile-based systems. First, sites strongly associated with social networking, such as Facebook, realize wide degrees of both "social" and "networking." A user can set up a Facebook page with minimal personal information, friend a lot of people, and then mostly read their posts without sharing information or interacting with them. Some Facebook pages, such as those of restaurants, double as static websites that people visit purely to find information (such as location and hours).

Sites such as YouTube, which are technically not defined as social networking sites, nevertheless promote massive amounts of interaction and engagement. Unlike Facebook, commenters may be unknown to each other and anonymous (although the system allows for links to profiles and personal information). Interaction is typically fleeting (although extended exchanges can occur, especially when posters don't agree with each other). The subject of interaction is usually limited to the content of the posted video, but can also link to other sites and information. Such sites, therefore, allow for significant social interaction among both known and unknown users. In a one-year ethnographic study of YouTube participation, Patricia G. Lange (2007) demonstrated how "YouTube participants used both technical and symbolic mechanisms to attempt to delineate different social networks" (p. 378). The analysis led her to propose

> new categories of nuanced behavior types that are neither strictly public nor strictly private . . . [P]arts of social networks, as supported by media circuits, can be examined to

> shed light on the dynamics of social network creation, maintenance, and negotiation. (p. 378)

An expanded notion of what counts as social networking allows us to consider the influence of wider contexts and degrees of interaction than what is constrained to Facebook and other bounded systems.

In addition, there is no necessary relationship between the degree of social networking allowed at a site and its intellectual affordances or potential for learning. Interaction on sites like Facebook can be banal and uninformative while exchanges on YouTube can involve significant informational and intellectual work. Judgments of the learning potential of a particular site must account not only for its interactional affordances but the extent to which users can make it a personal learning environment (PLE) and use it for self-regulated learning (see Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2001, including their review of the literature on PLEs).

WIDENING THE LENS

To mine and analyze the discourse of online social interaction (including interaction that extends beyond the conventional definition of social networking)—what James P. Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes (2011) called "passionate affinity spaces" (p. 69)—I engaged in a sustained descriptive study of diverse sites, all of which revealed similar rhetorical and linguistic principles and practices, as well as various kinds of reasoning, problem-solving, and idea-sharing, that should be of interest to teachers. This inquiry was primarily interpretive, based on an analysis of the users' posts and exchanges and the kinds of deep-structure cognitive, informational, and rhetorical features beneath these surface forms. However, as I will suggest later, more formal case studies, data-mining, and quantitative descriptive research are needed to extend, refine, or counter the conclusions here.

Sites included two dozen YouTube videos that, like the whale video, generated thousands of comments; several years of posts by school-aged children to forums on National Geographic for Kids; several additional fan sites for NFL football teams; several forums at Reddit.com, especially subreddits devoted to particular areas of interest; and several independent forums on specialized topics. Some sites are heavily moderated to ensure that posts conform to standards of decency and relevance. Others freely tolerate all messages, but sometimes provide a way for users to flag inappropriate posts for removal or vote to like particular posts. Some sites attract tens of thousands of viewers and participants and others are far more limited in membership. Each site, however, decenters the

role of authorship, accepts mass participation and "distributed expertise," and creates "valid and rewardable roles for all who pitch in" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 227). The sites also typically value inclusion and participation but may do so according to tacit rules of membership or the lack thereof; posters may or may not be ostracized or ridiculed, depending on the cohesiveness of membership and established rhetorical boundaries. At some sites, flaming is common; at others it is rare.

It is also important to realize the sites connect a wide array of individuals across every demographic imaginable, from pre-teens to retirees, lawyers to factory workers, Ph.D.s to high school dropouts. But the diversity of audiences that populate interactive sites can provide powerful resources for students who are otherwise restricted by age and educational environment to interact with often like-minded peers; thus this becomes an issue with important instructional implications. The diversity of perspectives is a far cry from pre-Internet academic peer groups that were often self-reinforcing and driven toward achieving ideological consensus (see Trimbur, 1989).

Two extended examples typical of what appears in these sites will demonstrate the range of rhetorical and intellectual capacities promoted by online social interaction, providing a context to consider how teachers might exploit social networking more fully in academic settings and how they might pursue more formal research on the effect of students' self-sponsored online interactions and their academic learning. The first is a one-minute video posted to YouTube promoting Dove's "self-esteem campaign for girls," which is designed to be "an agent of change to inspire and educate girls and young women about a wider definition of beauty" (Dove, 2011). The video shows in one minute of fast-motion film the transformation of a young woman into a billboard model. First, several kinds of makeup are applied to her face and her hair is coiffed. A still photo of her enhanced appearance is then photo-manipulated in continued fast-motion: Her neck and eyebrows are raised, her face is subtly stretched or shrunk in different places, and her cheekbones are enhanced (see comparison in Figures 16.1 and 16.2). The last few seconds show the finished photo enlarged on a street billboard, beneath which two women are passing by. A final caption reads: "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted." This fades to: "Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshop for Girls" and a URL (Dove Campaign, n.d.). The video won the Grand Prix at the 2007 Cannes International Advertising Festival. Although Dove posted its video on YouTube, several other users reposted it. Together, the various uploaded versions yielded thousands of written responses. By the time of this writing, the video at the link I used had been viewed 5,483,084 times and contained 1,144 comments.
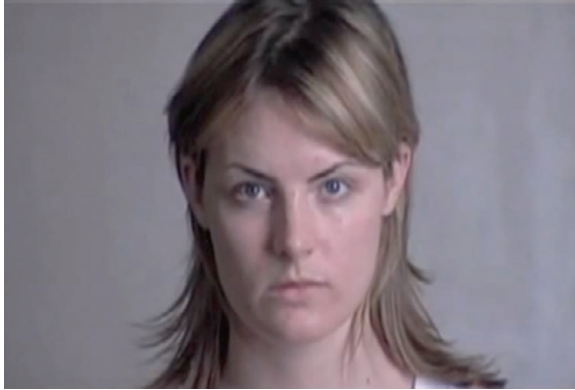
Figure 16.1. Dove Model Before

Figure 16.2. Dove Model After

In addition to the typical banal chatter, the Dove installation has attracted many more sober and thoughtful responses. One poster (Kaylee) expresses outrage: "This absolutely disgusts me. Shame on these people creating a false sense of beauty. This is why the celebrities are going without makeup, to show how they really look and to prove that this is not them." This sentiment is repeated dozens of times in various forms. At first, some of the responses appear to be criticizing the Dove commercial itself, but on closer inspection it's clear that their concerns are directed at the purveyors of photo manipulation and other forms of fake beauty. When responders do mistakenly criticize Dove as the company creating artificial beauty, they are soon corrected by other posters.

Another contributor, Jamie, shifts the burden back to consumers by asking us to consider what's motivating businesses to create such images:

> I agree that creating a false sense of beauty has harmed the self esteem of countless women, as well as disturbed the perspectives of both sexes, but don't blame these people. These people are doing their jobs—selling a product using methods they've found to be most effective among their client base. And who is their client base? We are. Truth be told, it is us, the consumers, who ought to be held most responsible for the disillusionment we see here.

This post has the effect of reorienting blame and making even those who are disgusted at least partly culpable, thereby extending the discussion in a new direction. TemporaryPoet then calls attention to the difference between makeup and photo manipulation: "To be honest, I'm fine with the make-up—it's supposed to enhance. It's the photoshopping that makes me feel sick." By pulling the two forms of fake beauty apart, TemporaryPoet asks us to deal with each on its own terms. Makeup—thousands of years old—appears less problematic than deliberately altering the physical structure of a person's face.

In the context of mounting consensus against photo manipulation, Ivy27V offers the perspective of someone working in photography and graphic art—an intended career goal:

> I clearly understand what this video is trying to say and i agree 100% to ignore what the world thinks is beautiful because that type of beauty isn't real. . . . But on the other hand to state that PHOTOSHOP is the problem now thats where u get me. im studying to be a photographer and im learning all the fun and exciting things you can do with it people need to understand that photography is an art form. you might as well say make up is the problem too lol.

As someone learning the craft and science of photography, Ivy27V further complicates the discussion by focusing on the difference between the technology as a value-neutral tool and the uses to which it is put. The post displays some of the characteristics of fast, unedited writing, but Ivy27V's ethos serves to extend viewers' conceptions of the audience visiting the site.

Further expanding and complicating the issues, EyeLean5280 compares photography to other human art forms and introduces the idea of artifice:

> There have always been impossible ideals of beauty, but when artists made them out of paint or marble, it was clear to everyone that they were artificial. In their hearts, most people *believe* photographs, even though they know they can be

altered. When people see photos, their subconscious accepts them at face value (so to speak). That's why the beauty industry is so destructive these days. To make it worse, the ideal pushed is artistically cheap and intellectually bankrupt. Blech.

In addition to comments on the substance of the commercial, some posters also offer thoughts about its compositional effectiveness. Brittney considers the producers' decision to show two women walking (obliviously) beneath the billboard in the final scene: "i feel this commercial would have had more impact if when it zoomed out to the billboard, a little girl passing by stared at it for a second." Vorpal22 returns to the issue of culpability, adding that the companies may be aware of their ads' negative effects: "If they know that their advertising campaigns are having a psychologically detrimental effect on society at large and they still pursue them, then I'd say that they are at fault." Cutforcuties then wonders why companies don't just use actual models:

> Yeah except in the real world, why would they bother spending so much time photoshopping when they could just hire models that are ALREADY considered perfect in the society? this ad is just nothing but a marketing scheme gaining so called empathy from women ourselves thinking buying Dove will let us see the end of this kind of manipulation when they themselves are creating one.

In a post rich with irony, Nathan opens up the possibility that, in spite of their campaign for natural beauty, Dove itself may be part of the problem:

> Everyone, please overlook/maintain naivete about the fact that dove is owned by the parent company (Unilever) that owns Axe deodorant. They're playing us consumers on both ends to make a little coin. But please, stay ignorant so they can maximize their money off us.

Along these lines, Brinah writes,

> I saw the casting call ad which said specifically that the women must not have any blemishes or tattoos. I thought it was a very contradictory thing to say considering the company is supposed to be promoting self esteem and embracing your flaws. wow.

Brinah appears to be correct—a New York area casting call for print models in Dove's Real Women campaign favored those who had "beautiful arms and

legs and face," were "well-groomed and clean" with "natural bodies, nicely fit, not too curvy and not too athletic," and had "flawless skin with no tattoos and scars" (Odell, 2014).

These posts live among hundreds of others that briefly express reactions ("disgusting," "that's crazy," "whoah!," "what has this world come to?"). But in their midst is also considerable direct exchange between and among the posters. The usual brevity of responses masks the underlying processes that viewers who visit the comments are engaged in: reading, thinking, reconsidering, reading more and rethinking, extending knowledge and perspectives, perhaps writing and posting a comment, reading more and then reading responses to what they have written and reacting in turn. A lively high school or college class session designed to analyze the video and provoke critical thinking might look much like what can be found at the site, perhaps without most of the simple, reactive comments. Here, posters are comparing views about beauty and how it's manifested, using irony and other tropes to express positions, occasionally playing with language, and extending and expanding their awareness of broader issues, contradictions, and hypocrisies surrounding definitions of beauty. There is also evidence of "lay expertise" when some posters offer confirmable information that adds complexity to the self-sponsored, collaborative analysis generated by viewers.

The second example is a news item about the killing of pilot whales by residents of the Faroe Islands in what are called "grindadráp" ("whale slaughters"), or "grinds." The sparsely populated Faroe Islands are located in the North Atlantic between Iceland and Norway, and are under the sovereignty of Denmark. When a pod of migrating pilot whales is spotted, men on speedboats and jet skis surround the whales and drive them into a cove, where they're manually killed and hauled to shore with grappling hooks. The event is watched by Faroese onlookers who include children. Populating the Internet are images of the coves during a grind, the sea bright red from the blood. Pilot whales, their bodies slashed open, are stacked up on the shore. Against sharp and extensive worldwide criticism, the Faroese vigorously defend the grinds, which are part of the heritage of the Faroese (the most direct descendants of the Vikings).

Commentary on the grinds can be found across dozens of Internet sites, some sponsored by animal rights and environmental organizations and some including heavily trafficked public forums. The posts I analyzed came from the Digital Journal site, which has over 40,000 content creators in 200 countries and reaches audiences of millions of monthly visitors. Topics include arts, auto, business, crime, entertainment, environment, food, health, lifestyle, politics, religion, science, sports, and travel. Visitors to Digital Journal can easily find other posts on the same or similar topics and visit related stories and pages.

This particular story reports on a grind of 230 pilot whales just days before

(Batt, 2012), and includes a five-minute video produced by Hans Peter Roth. The video shows the gutting, measuring, and marking of dead whales, which are moved with heavy equipment back into the water to be hauled by boat to a main harbor for processing. Children jump around on the dead whales, whose bodies are slashed open at the spinal cord almost to decapitation. One scene shows what appears to be the surreptitious removal of a whale fetus from a dead female and its disposal in a special yellow bin. At the end of the video, against a backdrop of a blood-stained sea, the words "Culture? Tradition? Worthwhile? Feel free to have your own opinion" appear.

In response to this story, Sasha writes,

> I feel sick. I am hurt to see that mankind could be so cruel.
> The manner in which the whales are killed is also so brutal.
> I've never seen a sea of blood before. It is horrific, even babies
> and pregnant females are killed. I hope the animal rights
> agencies are doing something to help these voiceless/helpless
> creatures.

Others echo her sentiments—"disgusting," "cruel," "barbaric," "no one should visit there," "how can they expose their kids to this?" But when some posters push back or raise alternative perspectives, there is again evidence of intellectual engagement of exactly the sort that characterizes a lively, successful discussion in a high school or college classroom. Paula, for example, writes,

> The Faroese ARE saying their whaling is for sustenance.
> They've never claimed otherwise. They take the meat from the
> hunts, and distribute it equally among the community. The
> Faroese have to import pretty much everything except fish,
> mutton, and dairy. One of the reasons they are doing so well
> is because they hunt the pilot whales. It's a cheap source of
> protein, that requires less pollution than beef or other com-
> mercially raised meat. They are living off the land, what's so
> bad about that?

Raven then adds,

> I disagree with the killing of whales, but I have to call people
> who can eat beef from the millions of cattle farmed and killed
> in horrific ways every day in the US alone hypocrites. I'm veg-
> an because I believe in no harm to any creature, cow or whale.

Bobbi mentions the high levels of toxins in the whales, which suggests that larger issues of pollution could end up stopping their consumption anyway—a

point variously used both ironically ("just go ahead faroes . . . kill and eat away") and as a comment about global environmental degradation.

In another case of the lay expert or opinion leader role, Phred provide some eye-witness accounts from a visit to Iceland and reflects on global reduction in resources:

> Rotting baleen was tossed hither and yon on all sides of the main gangway from the water up to the processing plant. Human beings have had this idea of Manifest Destiny for a long time, that the resources of the planet are there to be exploited so that we can enrich ourselves. Those resources are going to come up short one day if we keep exploiting them as we do now. We will no doubt have to tighten our belts (and stop killing whales in so-called cultural events) for maybe some generations to come. But humankind will get through these tough times.

Such posts, which express various degrees of authority from experience, occupation, or casual-to-serious inquiry, stand out from the others because they bring some additional knowledge that moves the discussion from pure opinion or knee-jerk reaction to more complex analysis. As mentioned earlier, they may also be written by posters in various age groups—a feature of forums that makes them strikingly different than the typical homogeneous classroom. Here, other participants do the job usually left to the teacher: to deepen consideration of issues from multiple perspectives and to bring personal and historical information into the mix.

For anyone who comes to the information about the grinds either supporting or condemning the continued practice, it is not difficult to see how posts complicate and vex the situation, creating cognitive dissonance and deeper thought. For example, in addition to the information already cited, posters point out

- that the Faroese government strictly controls the grinds;
- that a government-sanctioned, painless way to kill the whales must be used;
- but that the question of pain is in dispute;
- that pilot whales are not endangered;
- but that the destruction of pilot whales by other means (death from boats in shipping lanes and in large-scale net fishing, for example) is diminishing their numbers, calling the grinds into question over the long term;
- that beef cattle, chickens, and hogs live in appalling and inhumane

conditions in the United States and are put to death in ways no less cruel than the whales;

- but that the slaughter of these livestock is not often seen publicly;
- that the grinds take place on a relatively small scale (about 800 whales per year) compared with practices in countries like Japan.

Self-correction of false or misleading information also occurs, with corroborating links or cited facts—a practice that Adol Esquivel, Funda Meric-Bernstam, and Elmer V. Bernstam (2006) found in a content analysis of 4,600 postings to a breast cancer support site. Only ten posts were found by medical experts to be false or misleading, seven of which were corrected by other participants within an average of four hours and 33 minutes.

Just as in the Dove commercial (as well as all the forums I analyzed, which are similar to thousands of other sites), comments on the grinds reveal multiple rhetorical, linguistic, conceptual, and information-giving and receiving skills at work, as well as multiple functions of language that scholars such as Michael A. K. Halliday (1975) placed at the center of human interaction and that educators believe should be part of the repertoire of students' literate experiences in school. These interactions are admittedly without a teacher or mediator, raw and undifferentiated, and subject to the usual flaming or name calling (one poster writes in response to a critic of the grinds, "I think you are ignorant and stupid. If you want to eat meat, you have to kill an animal. That's it"). But serious intellectual work is quite common—work that involves and hones skills of problem-solving, argumentation, the negotiation of alternate views, the mediation of ideological clashes, critical examination of related contexts and issues, and the sharing of further material through eyewitness accounts or links to deeper and more extensive background reading. Much of this obviously takes place on the participants' own time, when they might otherwise be unengaged in anything resembling academic learning or the consideration of important subjects.

BRIDGING LITERACIES: NEEDED RESEARCH ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Critical analysis of the relationship between self-sponsored writing and academic writing must include the question of improved ability. If students are now writing more than any generation in history, shouldn't new, tacitly learned skills flow effortlessly from their interactions at their favorite forums into their causal analysis of the Mexican revolution or their report on gel formation of peptides in food biology? But such is not apparently the case. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) literacy scores, for example, have remained flat

for the decades before and since the advent of the Internet (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014)—a point that alarmist critics of technology have been quick to exploit (e.g., Bauerlein, 2008).

In addition to the lack of academic connections to self-sponsored literacies, considerable new research is revealing the challenges students face when they move across different discursive communities and try to transfer knowledge and ability to them (Anson & Moore, 2016; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). No writing scholars believe that students effortlessly transfer knowledge and ability from one discursive domain to a new, unfamiliar one (Brent, 2011). But there is growing consensus that certain educational processes can encourage the kind of rhetorical awareness that facilitates the deployment of existing ability in new settings (Anson & Moore, 2016; Beaufort, 2007; Wardle, 2009; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). In light of the considerable overlap we can discern between the discourse of self-sponsored digital interaction and the demands of academic writing tasks, more intentional bridging of the two promises to strengthen students' knowledge *about* writing in addition to their meta-awareness of various rhetorical, stylistic, and genre-based strategies (see Downs & Wardle, 2007).

However, much is still to be learned about the relationship between the two domains of practice. Can we study and document in more than an impressionistic way what deep-structure intellectual, rhetorical, and informational capacities are learned or practiced through self-sponsored online writing? How does that learning compare with the processes students use to gain similar capacities in academic contexts? Does bridging students' self-sponsored online writing activities and their academic work bring tacit experience and learning into consciousness, and with what effect? Does such bridging return to affect the nature and quality of students' self-sponsored writing, not just their academic work?

This and other research can help us not only to understand the underlying intellectual processes fostered by students' self-sponsored digital writing, but to find ways in which we might connect it to their academic study. Clearly, self-sponsored, nonacademic writing will only increase and involve a larger percentage of the population, especially globally. As Andrea Lunsford (2010) pointed out, the changes we are experiencing in communication technologies

> alter the very grounds of literacy as the definition, nature, and scope of writing are all shifting away from the consumption of discourse to its production across a wide range of genre and media, away from individual "authors" and to participatory and collaborative partners-in-production; away from a single static standard of correctness to a situated understanding of audience and context and purpose for writing. (para. 9)

Continuing to keep students' self-sponsored digital literacies at arm's length from their academic work may only isolate and narrow the classroom as a context for literacy development, drive its activities increasingly into obsolescence, and cause us to miss rich opportunities for the development of rhetorical, linguistic, social, and intellectual dimensions of literacy.

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