

"I FOUND IT ON THE WEB, SO WHY CAN'T I PUT IT IN MY PAPER?": AUTHORIZING BASIC WRITERS

ABSTRACT: The World Wide Web dramatically transforms basic writers' dialogic processes because Web source texts do not undergo conventional review processes to establish credibility. However, basic writing students' use of the World Wide Web in the dialogic process can advance a number of pedagogical objectives as students enter the "conversation of ideas" through reading and writing, particularly in terms of how basic writers become authorized in the academic community.¹ Student evaluation of Web source texts not only makes visible how authorization occurs but engages students in this process. Moreover, the questionable quality and credibility of Web-based source texts in the dialogic process brings the related skills of critical reading and thinking, of particular importance to underprepared writers, to the forefront of classroom pedagogy. Paradoxically, though, this technology also necessitates a reconsideration of the relationship between authority, academic discourse, and basic writers.

Introduction

As technology rapidly advances, it continues to transform how we basic writing instructors approach our classes. Having introduced word processing software and electronic conferences into our classrooms, we now must consider the influence on pedagogy of the World Wide Web as it brings widely varied and easily-accessible source texts into basic writers' knowledge-making processes. The Web dramatically transforms the dialogic process because Web source texts do not undergo conventional review processes to establish credibility. Indeed, many Web-based source texts are "self-published" or have a vested economic interest.

I will argue in this paper, however, that basic writing students' use of the World Wide Web in the dialogic process can advance pedagogical objectives as students enter the "conversation of ideas" through reading and writing, particularly in terms of how basic writers become

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authorized in the academic community. Student evaluation of Web source texts not only makes visible how authorization occurs but engages students in this process. Moreover, the questionable credibility of Web-based source texts in the dialogic process brings the related skills of critical reading and thinking, of particular importance to underprepared writers, to the forefront of classroom pedagogy. Paradoxically, though, I believe this technology also necessitates a reconsideration of the relationship between authority, academic discourse, and basic writers.

Academic Discourse, Authority, and the Web

Basic writing pedagogy emerging from social constructivist views of writing encourages students to see their written texts as part of academic discourse, a larger conversation taking place in writing. This approach brings with it the assumption that developmental writers can produce serious writing if we challenge them with important, intellectual issues and enable them to enter the conversations we deem significant. As Ann Berthoff remarks, we should want our students producing texts “worth reading” (6), writing that “engages us because it is dialogic” (9). But the question revolves around what we deem as “worth reading,” or, to put it another way, what we define as “academic enough.” By entering into the conversations taking place in the academy, students can discover what it means to be part of a discourse community and to share in the creation and communication of knowledge. Arguably, though, they can also learn what it feels like to be excluded from such a privileged group.

David Bartholomae’s landmark essays “Inventing the University” and “Writing on the Margins: The Concept of Literacy in Higher Education” locate the basic writer outside academic discourse, lacking the *authority* academic writers possess. Basic writing classes, therefore, begin either the acculturation or resistance process that initiates students into the academic community or enables them to critique it. If student writers need to become *authorized* to gain entry into the academic discourse community (whether to adapt or transform it), as these models suggest, can they gain this authority through the use of unauthorized source texts in the dialogic process? Moreover, how do we define such authority at a time when technology has irrevocably altered notions of literacy and competence?

My focus in this paper is specifically on Web materials as *source texts*, not as objects of study. Cultural critique pedagogy, which encourages a broadened notion of “text”—from advertisements to behaviors such as tattooing and body piercing to the Web itself—has informed us of the value of “unauthorized” texts in that they force us to reexamine the mythologies of culture that define and are defined by us—and

our students. However, even in cultural studies approaches in composition and basic writing classes (including my own), the critiques play themselves out—finally—in the conventional formal essay. That is, while notions of text-as-subject have broadened, notions of text-as-form—and the source texts in the production of the essay form—remain relatively unchanged (see Sidler).

While academic discourse itself is highly contested (see Bartholomae, Elbow, Kraemer), at the risk of oversimplification, I like to think of it broadly as the knowledge-making *process* specific to the academy. Though variations in this process, as well as in what constitutes knowledge, exist both between and within disciplines, we cannot ignore the common thread: knowledge builds upon prior knowledge as the inquirer/writer engages with other points of view. This *dialogic* process places a student's written text, according to Bartholomae, "in a space defined by all the writing that has preceded [it]" (64). However, the academic writing space does not include *all* writing, as Bartholomae claims, but only *authorized* texts. Peter Elbow explains it this way: "as academics . . . we have various aids to authority. The most obvious one is to take a ride on the authority of others. . . . What we write is not just a neat idea we had that we send out to be judged on its own merits; it builds on Aristotle and echoes Foucault" (148). Because academics cannot gain authority from "taking a ride" on unauthorized texts, do students close the door on the academic community when they use unauthorized source texts accessed through the Web? To extend Elbow's metaphor, can students "take a ride" on the academic highway while dragging a garbage truck behind them? The presence of the Web in basic writers' knowledge-making processes thus compels us to question the academic discourse paradigm primarily because it brings nonacademic (unauthorized) discourses into the dialogic process and the "conversation."

Don Kraemer suggests that the way citations are used in an essay is what counts: "Citing your Aunt Judy or Tracy Chapman probably isn't going to count for much in anyone's academic discourse, but . . . just citing James Kinneavy won't necessarily count for much either. What counts is why Kinneavy's words are telling or how Aunt Judy's words can critically recontextualize the academic discussion underway" (56). Though Kraemer contradicts himself (does he think Aunt Judy can ever "count" in academic discourse?), his points are nevertheless instructive: even if we could make Aunt Judy "count" in academic writing (as more and more feminist compositionists, in particular, attempt to do; see Tompkins), it would require a lot more work. Aunt Judy must be authorized by the writer; Kinneavy already carries this weight, even though the academic writer must use Kinneavy's idea dialogically and intelligently.

While many basic writing instructors ask students to evaluate

the authority of source texts in the meaning-making process, basic writers may be reluctant to evaluate “academic” sources which carry the *assumption* of authority, *especially* because these are the students who most likely lack the confidence and perhaps even the tools for questioning such status. Students may not be aware of the review process, but they have a tacit understanding of the privileged status of an academic or otherwise reputable journal mainly because we have consistently placed parameters on what kinds of source texts they can use (we view *People* less favorably than *Newsweek*, *Newsweek* less favorably than the *Journal of Popular Culture*). Moreover, as often as we have tried to convince students that academic or reputable (by journalistic standards) status does not imply “truth,” only a certain level of validity and reliability, Penrose and Geisler’s study suggests the undergraduate, unauthorized writer tends to view “academic knowledge” and the source texts for that knowledge as fact.² Their study, which involves a freshman writer they define as “relatively skilled,” indicates how difficult it must be for basic writers to assert authority over *published* material. These writers have been told by their institution, by virtue of their placement in developmental courses, that they are unprepared for college-level work. Basic writers’ status as novices in a new, intimidating environment may lead them to feel they have no basis for challenging “expert” knowledge.

Basic writers’ use of unauthorized source texts through the Web raises additional pedagogical questions. Paul Linnehan uses the phrase, “sustained, **disciplined**, intellectual inquiry” (56, emphasis added), when referring to basic writers in the meaning-making process. But when we introduce unauthorized source texts from the Web into this process, “disciplined” inquiry seemingly becomes undisciplined chaos. Because Web-based source texts lack the implicit assumption of authority, the evaluation process itself takes on greater urgency. When basic writers do evaluate academic or other conventionally reputable source texts, the answer itself is inevitable, even though the evaluative process itself remains worthwhile as basic writers hone analytical skills: these sources are valid or they would not *be* “academic.” Critique of these texts, therefore, may lean more towards students’ assessments of how the source writers establish authority rather than whether they do so. The existence of authority is assumed, even if the rhetorical strategies compel analysis and evaluation. Indeed, when my basic writing students read academic texts, I customarily ask students questions about tone, types of evidence, strength of evidence, soundness of logic, and how these rhetorical techniques contribute to the overall persuasiveness of the written text. Through these questions I hope to foster students’ critical reading skills; but it is the strength of a given writer’s persuasion, rather than authority itself, at issue. When we bring the World Wide Web into basic writers’ meaning-making processes, we

transform these assumptions of authority in source texts. Using Web sources, students join not only an “authorized” academic conversation but an unauthorized one. As such, the dynamics of their participation in the conversation inevitably changes.

Serving Academic Discourse: Basic Writers Reading/ Writing “Authority” on the Web

Web sources in basic writers’ meaning-making processes offer an important opportunity to serve both the widely accepted objectives of the academic discourse paradigm in basic writing and to rethink those objectives themselves. These objectives include, first of all, fostering students’ sensitivity to academic discourse conventions. In both the accommodation and resistance models of academic authority, basic writers become authorized by their ability to operate from inside academic discourse—whether to adapt or resist. Web source texts in the meaning-making process put discourse itself at the center of inquiry, and by affording students the opportunity to move back and forth between authorized and nonauthorized discourses, we highlight their existence as different communities. For example, in a theme-based course questioning conventional definitions of literacy, my basic writing students this semester read E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s “Cultural Literacy and the Schools.” After our careful and deliberate rhetorical analysis of this article, I sent students out onto the Web to find documents that “converse” with Hirsch’s concept of cultural literacy. We paid careful attention to both the content of the information they found and the forms in which that information was delivered (from advertisements and order forms for Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* to a book-length hypertext document called “Engines for Education” written by a cognitive scientist at the Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University), questioning at every turn the Web source writers’ credibility and the varied discourse conventions they utilized.

When we encourage basic writers to use nonacademic sources found on the Web, we compel students to establish the authority of a text and simultaneously demonstrate that authority is of a community’s own making. Moreover, because Web sources may reflect theirs rather than their instructors’ discourse communities, students may identify more readily with these texts and, through the process of authorization of such texts, may authorize themselves. Ironically, then, by encouraging the use of unauthorized discourses in the dialogic process, we may inadvertently accelerate students’ appropriation of academic discourse. These students come to “own” the source texts and thus their own essays as well.

World Wide Web access in the classroom also demonstrates

knowledge-making in action, thereby enhancing the social context of writing. Eldred's point about computer-mediated-communication before the proliferation of the Internet and World Wide Web has applicability in this newer context as well: "when students find their work becomes part of a text base, they understand more fully the notion of 'intertext': the idea that their work is integral to a network of knowledge available to augment and increase the knowledge of others" (212). The Web has broad implications for a "network" of communication, for demonstrating the interconnectedness of ideas and opinions, disagreements and controversies across a wide range of communities. However, in Eldred's example, the writing teacher has control over the text base; we give control over to our students when they use Web sources in their writing projects.

Some Web sources, like archived listservs ("frozen," inactive listserv discussions available as Web sites for spectating rather than participation), enable students to see the "conversation" occurring and may lead them to insert themselves into it. Penrose and Geisler accurately point out that student writers' "outsider" status makes them reluctant to become "creators" rather than "reporters" of information (515). Linda Adler-Kassner and Thomas Reynolds, however, suggest how classroom access to library databases and Web browsers "close the gap between student writing and source texts" as students feel validated when they see other texts in dialogue with their own (175).³ In archived listservs, students can see the back and forth disagreements, testing of claims, and rethinking of assertions at work. Academic knowledge thrives on disagreement, so by viewing these activities, students may more willingly participate and offer points of view if they believe more than one "right" answer exists. The metaphor of a "conversation" becomes more concrete, and student writers may gain "some sense of authors speaking to one another" (Penrose and Geisler 514). By viewing certain kinds of "conversations" on the Web and then writing their essays in response to these conversations, students create their own context to "see themselves as authors, reading and writing alongside other authors in the development of community knowledge and norms" (Penrose and Geisler 518). Students authorize and empower themselves through this process.

The most compelling example for me of an archived listserv's contribution to basic writers' willingness to enter the conversation of ideas came last fall when some of my basic writing students chose to study and write about tattooing. The archived conversation, which occurred in July 1996, included participants from a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds (see Yee). The students examining the archived listserv could easily "imagine" themselves in the conversation when we uncovered this posting by Daniel Solomon: "Well, I'm just a poor little undergrad—haven't even majored in anth, yet, but

this has driven me out of my dark&dingy lurking place to attempt a feeble, unlearned comment." This undergraduate student (whether he had ever been a "basic writer" was not clear) felt unauthorized to speak—but then did so anyway.

The nature of the conversation itself was also instructive for students as it ranged from highly "academic" (e.g., anthropological connections to primitive cultures) to the more personal: "With all this talk of a lack of ritual, etc. in Western 'tattooing,' is there anyone on this list who has actually gotten a tattoo or talked to someone who has gotten a tattoo?" asks Marie Conrad. Indeed, the participants themselves display conflicting pulls between academic and public discourse, grappling with the rules of evidence they should apply. Mike Shupp, a frequent contributor of scholarly analyses and explanations, responds to Conrad's question this way:

Talked to someone who has? Of course. A freshman girl in an English class I took had one and wrote about it most amusingly for the school paper. But to tell the truth, she didn't go into her motives and I doubt she has any idea as to why she got a butterfly on her ankle—it was "just a neat thing to do" and affordable (at \$60), so she did it.

Would "just a neat thing to do" qualify as evidence in academic writing, even for basic writers beginning the process of acquiring academic discourse? Clearly, the listserv's vacillation between academic and nonacademic discourse provides opportunities for basic writers to see a conversation occur, to compare and contrast evidentiary decisions based on the nature of the discourse, and feel more confident to engage in the conversation occurring in the classroom and their own written essays.

Web access in the basic writing classroom also hones students' critical reading abilities because it directly involves them in the process of determining authority. Because of the relationship between the social view of writing and the knowledge-making process—that "new texts are generated through interaction with previous texts" (Eldred 205)—we cannot ignore the crucial role reading plays in this newer conception of a networked basic writing classroom, where students have access to a whole array of source texts. Good writing depends on good reading abilities. When students enter a larger, written conversation enacted by fellow academics, they must build knowledge from previous knowledge, read from outside sources, evaluate and synthesize the information as they accept, reject, or modify it when formulating their own ideas (208). For basic writers, this is particularly problematic. It comes as no surprise that underprepared writers have little experience with reading. Indeed, in my current basic writing classes

studying literacy, the majority of students readily admit to reading only when forced. Almost none read for pleasure, and most say they can “get all the information they need” from television.

When we require students to evaluate the authority of Web-based source texts, we also bring issues of authority directly into the classroom. Students can become more attuned to acculturation processes in the accommodation model; on the other hand, bringing the contingent nature of authority itself to the fore can also enable a resistance model; basic writers may begin to understand the connection between language and ideology. Because of the questionable authority of many Web-based source texts, students’ evaluation of these texts – especially in juxtaposition with their “academic” (authorized) counterparts – highlights and reinforces how power relations play out in discourses and texts. Students can begin to ask who retains the power to determine who can speak with it. Does one’s educational credentials alone authorize that person to speak in a particular community, as Penrose and Geisler assert? Are academic credentials “authority” enough, when knowledge has not been through the rigorous review process? That is, can claims be supported with sources that are accompanied by “expert” names, even when the sources themselves have been “self-published” outside the traditional review process? Some of the students studying tattooing found articles in *Journal of Popular Culture* and *Adolescence* and were confident of their authority, only to find they understood little in these articles (see DeMello, Houghton). Another student accessed a Brown University web site on tattooing and, after questioning its academic status and authorizing it, could understand enough of the information to integrate it into his text (see Landow). By being flexible with source texts, we force students to participate in determining acceptable evidence in their own essay writing (though they are obviously aware that the instructor will judge their decisions). Issues of authority multiply.

To facilitate this process, I ask students to figure out what kind of document they have found and what they know about the writer(s) and the original audience(s). I ask them questions about the validity and reliability of the information itself, in essence asking them to *authorize* the Web document to *authorize* their own text. I ask them about the writer’s objectivity, the weight and sources of the evidence, and the writer’s *claim* to authority. We also discuss potential indications of bias, like sites for tattoo stores (business home pages are advertisements) and sites that try to convince users to purchase Hirsch’s books. Students’ analysis and evaluation of the source document must extend beyond figuring out how the writer is persuasive to *whether* he/she is persuasive based on the writer’s authority or knowledge on the subject. Consequently, students need new models as they integrate and apply “self-authorized” ideas into their writing. A sentence lead-in like

"According to David Bartholomae" [or other academic expert]," carries an assumption of authority; using his name alone is enough. But a source writer from the Web without built-in (academic) authority must be authorized *in* the student's text, not only in the classroom (for the instructor's benefit). The student writer might write, "According to [author] in an archived e-mail conference on the Web," but the student must take a further step, explaining how or why he/she has authorized the point made by this writer (for example, that the source author has studied the topic extensively, has experienced the topic, etc.). In this case, the student invites an unauthorized source into his/her writing, authorizes it, and then claims authority for him/herself and his/her own text.

Finally, Web access expands students' (and our own) notions of literacy. I agree with Lee Odell's concerns about the trend to move basic writing in the direction of composition, specifically in terms of the overriding emphasis on academic literacy. Citing scholars in technical communication, Odell notes how academic literacy ignores visual aspects of texts, video, multi-media, and hypermedia. The Web in the classroom, as it brings newer kinds of texts into the dialogic process, raises questions about traditional conceptions of "good writing" while it also invites the opportunity to further students' critical reading abilities through a study of these nontraditional documents. Students learn to "read" hypertexts and hypermedia, increasingly pervasive discourses (which serves the simultaneous objective of reinforcing the idea that discourses differ). Indeed, John Slatin's initiative in constructing and articulating a theory or rhetoric of hypertext—"to discover the principles of effective communication and then develop ways of implementing those principles through the available technology" (874)—has broad implications for the unauthorized basic writer. Slatin concludes that because hypertext dramatically and profoundly changes traditional organization of texts, "hypertext requires authors and system designers to find new methods of indicating relationships, representing and constructing knowledge, and achieving coherence" (882). Students *reading* and *evaluating* hypertext documents in the process of authorization become part of the *process* of defining such a rhetoric, of helping to identify, determine, and define effective hypertext communication. No longer passive recipients of others' notions of effective discourse, students become the determiners of authority and in the process authorize themselves.

The process of authorizing hypermedia involves complex cognitive processes that both differ from and reinforce traditional means of evaluating texts. Hypertext theorists (see Slatin, Shirk, among others) point out the complex decision-making process of hypertext writers, given the nonlinear structure of hypermedia and the freedom of readers as they make their way through these texts. Basic writers be-

ginning to understand that rhetorical contexts affect writers' choices can benefit from exercises that consider a web developer's decisions about topics, links, networks, animation sequences, and musical or voice sequences in the attempt to foster user readability and comprehension (see Slatin for a good discussion of predictability in traditional texts and hypertext). Hypertext analysis allows students to consider complex issues of organization, purpose, and audience (readability). As Slatin remarks, hypertext and traditional texts differ in their assumptions about "what readers do and the ways in which those assumptions about reading affect the author's understanding of composition" (870). Basic writers can certainly benefit from comparing and contrasting texts and hypertexts as they consider how readers' needs govern writers' decisions.

Surfing (and Slipping on) the Web: Issues and Concerns

Web accessibility, therefore, offers the opportunity to advance a number of pedagogical objectives in basic writing classes according to the academic discourse paradigm. However, it also provides a forum for furthering discussions of the paradigm itself. We should ask what it means to be a college writer, what writing and thinking skills we want our students to achieve, and whether we should emphasize academic discourse at the expense of discourses students will inevitably need after college. Perhaps more significantly, we need to consider whether de-authorizing some students through the academic process is elitist, excluding those who do not or cannot live up to the standards defined by academic professionals. Web accessibility in the basic writer's meaning-making process compels us in its own way to confront issues of authority and privilege within basic writing itself.

Scholars who have used and written about computer-mediated communication (CMC) in terms of online conferencing forums address authority issues, but these issues differ markedly from those raised by Web source texts in the dialogic process. Typically, scholars believe CMC enables students to create their own diverse community, participate in written dialogue in the classroom, and engage in a process that mirrors their own initiation into academic discourse. Research suggests that the absence of teachers (academic authority) in these forums enables students to challenge social and political definitions of good writing and acceptable knowledge (see Harris and Wambean, Cooper and Selfe). Pamela Gay claims CMC in basic writing classes specifically enables students to extend their conversations beyond the classroom, "become part of a wider network of writers" (75) and "in acting like writers, actually become writers" (76).⁴ Through critical reflection, students uncover the forces that disempower them.

However, online conversations are considered neither academic nor authorized (see Harris and Wambeam). The Web in the meaning-

making process more closely resembles traditional academic communication as students access source texts as part of the dialogic process, though the instability, permeability, and questionable authority of these sources obfuscate the process. Even Cooper and Selfe, who advocate the use of online forums as a means to counter teacher-centered hegemony, distinguish “formal” class discussions and written essays from asynchronous computer-based conferences (848), implying that it may be acceptable for students to only *simulate* academic discourse in prewriting spaces, but in formal papers or projects, they must *attain* it. It is, again, a question of authority.

Basic writers’ Web authorization thus raises and reinforces the tensions between the accommodation and resistance models of academic discourse. Do the new technologies signify a need for altering traditional notions of academic authority, particularly in light of cultural studies and deconstruction’s challenge to traditional academic practices? Many recent studies in basic writing, composition, and computer-assisted composition question the accommodation paradigm, particularly its tendency to reinforce the status quo. Cooper and Selfe, for example, argue that “even as it empowers students with new knowledge and the ability to operate successfully within academic discourse communities, [it] also oppresses them, dictating a specific set of values and beliefs along with appropriate forms of behavior” (850) and precluding “dissent through discourse” (851). Feminist compositionists, for example, refer to academic discourse as patriarchal and exclusionary; similar claims are made about its ethnocentricity, particularly when it comes to basic writers. This debate over developing students’ critical consciousnesses through the system — whether by teaching academic discourse we are oppressing or liberating them — rages on but takes on even more heightened meaning with the proliferation of the World Wide Web. Web access in basic writing literally dumps unauthorized conversations into previously-guarded domains.

Ideally, social constructivist views *distinguish* discourses from one another, claiming appropriateness or acceptance according to time and place (the social dynamics that define or comprise a particular community). From this perspective, academic writing is only better writing *in* the academy rather than in any transcendent way. But we cannot pretend that a hierarchy about “better” thinking and writing does not actually exist. Furthermore, as Elbow notes, it is “self-serving” to “defin[e] people as ignorant unless they are like us” (138); “in *using a discourse* we are also tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student’s place and mode of operation in it. In particular we are affirming a set of social and authority relations” (146). Privileging academic over other kinds of discourse says something about how we see ourselves in relation to our students. Marilyn Cooper may suggest we do not “want our students to be ‘better thinkers,’ but rather that we want them to join us, to be a part of one of our communities” (qtd. in

Kraemer 55), but I believe the language of the academic discourse paradigm suggests otherwise. We ask our students to work against commonplaces, to dig deeper for insights, to provide well-reasoned arguments rather than mere opinions. Some types of discourse are simply considered more learned or sophisticated than others, and until and unless we acknowledge this disparity, and decide whether and/or how to remedy it, we cannot adequately deal with the changes technology brings to writing classrooms.

Carol Severino claims that this crucial debate over whether the "purpose" of a writing course is "to help students fit into society or to convince them to change it" may "never be resolved" (74). I suggest that resolution can only occur if compositionists attempt to resolve our own issues of marginalization and hegemony through a careful reconsideration of the academic discourse paradigm, particularly in light of technology's sweeping influence on literacy, a process that has certainly begun. This self-examination must begin with basic writers because, as Jane Hindman asserts, the basic writer is positioned "at the center of the system that—in part at least—gains its authority by de-authorizing them" (62) since we call "good writing" writing that looks like our own (67). But Hindman claims she does not want to suggest anything wrong with how we de-authorize basic writers while authorizing ourselves, or even that "what we think is good writing isn't 'really' good" (69); she simply wants to point out that the qualities of what we consider to be "good writing" are not fixed, but contingent. This seems too obvious to me; indeed, social constructionism and theories of academic discourse are grounded in the knowledge that communities vary in regard to what constitutes knowledge and how to communicate that knowledge. I think the more important question has to do with privileging one kind of discourse over another, not simply because a particular discourse is appropriate to a particular time and place, but because it is better, more sophisticated, or more intellectual.

Web accessibility may provide the opportunity to broaden notions of literacy, as Odell and others suggest, at least for student writers who, for the most part, will never choose to join the scholarly community. I love academic discourse because of its potential to lead writers and readers to listen to other points of view. This is its greatest benefit to basic writers in the meaning-making process. But perhaps it is time to broaden the academic discourse paradigm itself and allow students to include points of view that really mean something to them and that they can understand (because academic source texts are often difficult for basic writers to understand, my students tend to distort and/or oversimplify them in the meaning-making process, as was the case with the scholarly articles on tattooing). I am not suggesting we move away from intellectual, meaningful issues in basic writing classes. Rather, we can teach students to write and think in ways that will be

useful to them both within and beyond the academy, and we will do that more effectively by not prescribing reasoned authority. If I were to have the opportunity to ask Elbow about allowing students to use Web sources in the dialogic process, I think he would be all for it, providing that students could independently *authorize* these texts as reasoned, sensible writing, regardless of whether it comes with the conventional kinds of authority we expect from academic discourse: “students can do intellectual work even in street language” (149). Returning to Severino’s claim about composition studies’ current struggle with the question over our role, I’d like to end with this thought: until we resolve whether or not we want to maintain our own position of authority – in the process deauthorizing our students – we have no right to even suggest that we teach students to “change society.” Change must begin in our own backyard.

Notes

1. Any time we discuss “basic writers” we run into a problem with definition since the “basic writers” at one school may be another’s composition students. Basic writers are comprised of a diverse group: represented and underrepresented students directly out of high school, adults returning to school, and ESL students. I am defining “basic writers” in the following way: students who did not meet the standards of their college or university’s placement system and are therefore underprepared for the level of writing expected at their institution.

2. Penrose and Geisler further claim that student writers tend to view “all texts (except their own) as containing ‘the truth,’ rather than as authored and subject to interpretation and criticism” (515), but we must question their use of the word “all” since their study included eight “scholarly” texts. We must also question whether source texts found through the Web carry the same weight of authority in students’ perceptions (this is an issue for all students, not only basic writers), an exploration I have begun. When my students first began using Web sources in their essays, they did very little evaluation of authority in these texts. The fact that it was published information was enough for them (hence my title, “I Found It on the Web So Why Can’t I Put It in My Paper?”). However, by making the Web itself part of our critique, students have begun to understand why a text’s credibility can be suspect.

3. However, as useful as their analysis may be, they fail to acknowledge the important aspect of how these newer technologies provide immediate resources for evaluation of “authority” of source texts. Focusing on how students can sift through World Wide Web informa-

tion to find "relevant" source texts (176), they omit considerations of authority and standards of academic discourse.

4. Though fewer studies have addressed CMC in basic writing classrooms, Gay's study and my own classroom experiences suggest that basic writers, considered to be largely comprised of underrepresented groups even more distanced from "academic discourse" than their composition counterparts, seem to be well-suited to both the social constructivist orientation in composition and CMC's potential to further its pedagogical objectives.

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