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Student Literacy and the Effect of Digital Writing

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WRITING COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY FELLOWSHIPS Closing Write-up for 2007-08

Researchers: Catherine McDonald and Amanda Hill, English Department

Title: Student Literacy and the Effect of Digital Writing

Research Question:

Our research question had three components:

- What is the effect of teaching the production of online texts?
- What is the effect of teaching the analysis of digital literacies?
- How do students assess the effect of studying self-sponsored digital literacies?

Method:

Our methodology was *a qualitative study using ethnographic techniques*, or more specifically, *ethnographic writing research*. Wendy Bishop explains this research methodology (Bishop, 1999). While ethnography is a phenomenological method of participating in a culture and giving an account of it as experienced by native members, *ethnographic writing research* is a less intensive study of the literacy practices of particular groups, often but not necessarily associated with teacher-research. In order to examine the interface between and among personal, public, and academic writing, our research documents how students take up these questions in an upper-level writing studies course. Therefore, we used the regular curriculum of English 301: the writing students did both online and in print, such as public blogs on the internet; the course Blackboard site; the mid-term paper; class discussion; and a survey after the work was completed.

Key Findings:

Our preliminary data suggests that our study participants are surprisingly less familiar with digital literacies, such as blogging, than we expected they would be. However, participants advocate the importance of analyzing the phenomenon of public writing online, despite the fact that they had mixed feelings about being asked to perform it as part of a classroom curriculum. One participant who argues for the critical need of including self-sponsored digital practices in classroom instruction coined the term “digidemic” to mean that the academic and the digital are interfacing in ways that send inevitable waves of change through our understanding of what writing is and what it means to be a writer.

Implications for Further Study:

According to new media scholars, when writing becomes a part of the public, rather than the academic, domain, writing scholars experience tension as we see the genres our students employ begin to shift in unrecognizable ways (Yancey 2004) while Anne Wysocki notes that responding to emergent literacies sends “waves of change shimmering” through composition pedagogy (2004). As rhetoric and composition scholars we have found that studying the blogging phenomenon with students opened up conversations about how writing, and the teaching of writing, must change along with the writing that occurs in the public domain. As the genres of the writing public evolve, our study on blogging may become relevant, but dated. Similar studies will need to address current popular digital genres as they emerge.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

Our goal was to better understand the connections among personal, public, and academic writing and what happens when teachers open up space in academic settings for conversation, analysis, and performance of these new digital genres. We have tentatively found that students advocate for the analysis of digital writing in academic spaces but paradoxically did not always bring the technical expertise we had anticipated. Their advocacy for analysis of digital writing implies that digital compositions are ones that students may be open and eager to discuss in the context of more traditional academic courses. The variety of literacies students brought to digital composition and analysis also suggests that, given the rapid speed of change of digital writing, its introduction into the classroom will urge students and teachers to collaborate on learning both technical skills and ways of analyzing since none of us can claim “expertise” in these genres.