Chapter 5
Composing Online:
Integrating Blogging into a Contemplative Classroom

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ABSTRACT

"The Internet is the most appealing and expressive technology that humanity has ever encountered; the point for teachers is not to push that round peg into our square hole, but to make the Internet a productive technology for what people inherently want to do, make sense with each other."-Fred Kemp

This chapter invites writing instructors to consider integrating blogging practices as a writing exercise that both supports the 21st Century Google-aged learner and the contemplative writing classroom. The author suggests that blogging mirrors traditional personal voice writing and, if supported by a mindful practice such as freewriting, can assist students in bringing all of their faculties into the classroom, thus providing a more holistic and meaningful learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, I did not know anything about blogging, nor did I belong to any online social network. So when I was required to use WordPress, Twitter, and Facebook while in my doctoral program, I felt like a fish out of water. I did not own a laptop or smartphone, and I did not feel I was as technologically adept as my white peers. As the only African American in my program, I felt much like the African American students that Samantha Blackmon (2007) acknowledges do not have equal material and intellectual access to computers in comparison to their more affluent white counterparts. Needless to say, I kind of hated the Rhetoric and Technology course I was required to take, and my dis-ease exhibited itself in the shoddy work I produced. I did not want to engage in Twitter discussions, create a classroom community through Facebook, or blog my responses to classroom readings. I wanted pen and paper. And I wanted to be in an embodied classroom, where, according to Janet Emig (2001), "learning takes place within authentic communities of inquiry with physical others" (p. 273).

I eventually got over my disdain for composing with technologies, perhaps simply because I could not get around it. When I began teaching Professional Writing, the textbook I adopted heavily supported online communities for professional

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4341-3.ch005

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networking, Websites for professional portfolios, and wikis for collaborative work. I could not ignore the responsibility I had as a classroom composition teacher to meet my Google Generation students where they were and to equip them with the necessary tools to be meaningful contributors to their technologically empowered communities. I needed to get with the program—literally—and effectively integrate technologies into my writing curriculum so that I could help writing students make meaning of themselves and others with the communication technologies with which they were familiar. And of course, as any good teacher does, I had to first familiarize myself with these technologies, particularly with blogging.

I have been using WordPress in my writing classrooms for four years now, and my appreciation of it increases with each new group of students. This essay explores my most recent endeavor with integrating WordPress into a contemplative reading and writing space I created for Florida A&M University's (FAMU) Improving Writing students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding Freewriting as a Contemplative Practice

As defined by the *Oxford Education Dictionary*, contemplation is "the action of beholding or looking at with attention and thought; the action of thinking about a thing continuously; attentive consideration, study." It is an exercise in deep concentration, which, in a contemplative classroom, can be honed by using the first ten minutes of class time to engage students in mindful breathing wherein they sit quietly and focus on their breath. According to Amy Saltzman, founder of the Association for Mindfulness in Education, "Mindfulness practices help students focus and pay attention. A few minutes of mindfulness practice can improve the learning environment" (*mindfuleducation.org*, 2013). By focusing on the breath, students are being trained to let go of the "monkey mind" that mindful practitioners (Jon Kabat-Zinn, Arthur Zajonc, and Thich Nhat Hanh) claim contribute to feelings of inferiority, loneliness, confusion, and fragmentation. And so, a contemplative *writing* pedagogy is an approach to writing instruction that infuses traditional writing practice with the experience of present awareness. Peter Elbow's freewriting exercise, when done mindfully, can garner such present awareness. His freewriting practice is akin to a meditative writing practice because it encourages writers to write without stopping for an allotted time—usually ten minutes—thus mirroring mindful breathing practice.

Like breathing meditation, where students are trained to acknowledge their thoughts and to let go of them by refocusing their attention to their breaths (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; mindfuleducation.org, 2013), freewriting allows students to let go of their thoughts (including inhibitions, inferiorities, confusions about writing, reading, or even the day's events) through non-stop writing. According to Elbow, once writers are able to give up control of their writing—particularly regarding English pragmatics, conventions, and standards—their writing skills will increase, for they will be uninhibited by the insecurities that result in "bad writing" (1981, p. 5). And so, the practice of nonstop writing and letting go is a practice in mindfulness.

Mindfully freewriting becomes a contemplative writing practice in two ways: 1). It anchors students' attention to the day's lesson, thus allowing them to be more deeply engaged; and 2). It records students' ideas, allowing them to notice their thoughts so that they can identify and interrupt patterns that keep them stuck in old habits that do not serve their whole person—mind, body, and soul. Other examples of classroom mindfulness practice include paying attention to sounds in the classroom, feeling the stomach rise and fall with each breath, and engaging in mindful looking by way of eye trick images. When students are able

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