**Manipulating Memory: Keeping it Real**

The networked classroom expands well beyond the course Wiki page, beyond the Facebook friend requests from students, even beyond the (failed) attempts of using Twitter during lectures. The digital classroom uses memory to make writing spaces available not only in a variety of settings (think: cloud computing), but more towards the consumption and production of texts, both for classroom use and as contributions to future knowledge collectivities. One of the interesting ways to think about this shift occurs right inside our classrooms—our students use social media and there is a distinct desire from the students to incorporate these technologies into our pedagogical practices. Rather than relying on rigid platforms like Blackboard, the classroom has become a flexible, multimodal space in which all participants can produce and consume knowledge. As it has been named elsewhere, our students are becoming “prosumers,” a fusion of producer and consumer, and this combination can translate into some exciting upgrades for college writing curriculum. And so I want to suggest that collective practices are beneficial for classroom productivity, and offer some thoughts about digital collaborative pedagogy.

Here, I offer some ideas about the possibilities of updating Kenneth Bruffee’s notion of collaborative pedagogy based primarily on his text *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. Bruffee’s pedagogy is designed around one basic idea, knowledgeable peers, and he uses these formations as the basis for the construction of knowledge *for* the students, *from* the students and into responsible and ethical citizen contributors to not only collective knowledge but even national memory. Bruffee defines collaborative learning as “a consensus among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers—something people construct by talking together and reaching agreement” (3). As the instructor, it becomes critical to learn the language of the peers—how can we become knowledgeable peers with our students of different educational backgrounds, levels, and interests than our own? As a writing teacher, I prefer to rely on the students’ ability to create knowledge among themselves. For instance, before any in-class peer-review activity begins, I encourage my students to reflect on the most difficult part of the writing assignment: Did the introduction cause you pain? Were the transitions especially tricky? What about researching—could you locate sources? When they read one of their peer’s papers, the students use these reflections in order to respond effectively *as experts*—even though they are only reviewing drafts, they have all experienced the assignment individually and now together. By initially examining the difficulties of the assignment, each student recognizes himself or herself as a writer. Although some problems are indeed more significant than others, the collective experience of writing separately plays into Bruffee’s concept of collaboration. Bruffee states that, “when [teachers] have successfully organized students to learn with one another instead of isolating themselves or competing against one another,” the importance of support groups function not only as knowledgeable peer groups, but also as a path to forming knowledge collectively (7). The instructor must not isolate the individual in the classroom, but transform the classroom into a hybrid space of teaching and learning, consumption and production, authority and decentralization.

As another example, I have created a “database” or “cloud” system assignment for my advanced Technical Writing course. The database/cloud assignment requires students to utilize a flexible, sharable platform, like a Wiki or a Google Doc, and input their developing research each week. At the end of the semester, each team will have a large database of research questions, contact information, and other important materials. This system becomes the main source of information for their final project proposal and also serves as the “knowledge reference center” for the entire group. In Jodie Nicotra’s article “Folksonomy and the Writing Space,” she suggests that, “In terms of the Web, prosumption has less to do with economic consumption than with acts of creative and rhetorical production” (W273). By contributing to a space of collective knowledge, the students are participating in collaborative activity, leading towards informed writing based primarily upon knowledge deemed credible by their peers.

This shift towards a prosumer classroom is the first step for a new model of digital collaborative pedagogy. Contemporary memory benefits from these collective spaces not only because the students are contributing to a knowledge base, but at the same time they are also learning what it means to be responsible memory makers. As the old cliché goes, you only get out of something what you are willing put to put into it. For collaborative memory systems, the quality of information students contribute to their databases is tied directly to the quality of their final product—if they use shoddy sources just to complete the assignment and get it off their backs, then it shows in the end. As responsible memory makers, learning to control how much and what kind of information is accessible becomes equally important to the quantity of digitally available means.

**Yours, Mine, Ours: Responsible Memory**

In his 2009 Society for Literature, Science and the Arts talk, multi-media artist Casey Alt described all writing composed and shared on social media sites, like Twitter, as “responses answering to no one” (1). We post updates and thoughts to social media platforms because we want people to listen or, more likely, because we want to tell people something. No matter how mundane our Facebook status update is, the point is to share some information to an audience from our personalized, privileged perspective. Our profiles indicate that we have hundreds of “friends,” but are these virtual connections actually reading what we have to say? Have they blocked our posts? Does everyone check Facebook or their Google Readers as much as I do? I don’t wish to this talk to sound like I have a digital fetish, but these are important questions to ask regardless if we check for updates once a week or once a minute. For anyone who participates in these mediums, Alt’s suggestion is a frightening realization. In fact, the assumed audience we think we have might not actually be listening or, worse still, might not be there at all. What is the purpose of a status update if no one is reading it? For rhetoricians, the suggestion of an assumed or non-existent audience stirs up some additional concerns about responsible persuasion. With an assumed audience, the entire rhetorical situation becomes confused—what kinds of rhetoricians are we if we don’t even know if we have an audience to persuade? If a rhetorician speaks and no audience hears the talk, is it still persuasion? In order to be responsible contemporary rhetoricians, must we take into account the possibility of a non-existent audience?

Alt proceeded by taking his suggestion one step further: what if Tweets are not simply answering to no one, but those status updates could actually increase the “possibility for response without *responsibility*” (1, emphasis mine). Here I find some interesting connections between a non-existent audience, the responsibility of response, and contemporary memory.

If we take a good look at the productive possibilities from all these digital outlets, it is becoming more unlikely that we are responding to no one, as Alt suggested, but we might instead be responding to *everyone*—without even knowing to whom we are replying or what our responses actually say. This unknown message coupled with an unknown audience only increases Alt’s concern about responsible response. How does this massive “reply-all” affect the ways we persuade, remember, and create memories for not only ourselves, but everyone else, too? As a result of the increasing utilization of cloud storage, collective knowledge bases, and social media spaces, the responsibility of memory is no longer individual responsibility.

Take, for instance, the rise in “amateur journalism”—individuals who are not employed by any professional news organization but still report on breaking news stories. The cable news channel CNN frequently promotes its user-centered news gathering feature called “iReport,” described on the website as, “the way people like you report the news” (CNN iReport). iReport is not the only outlet of its kind, and most local news stations, news papers, and magazines are increasing the call for first-hand videos and accounts of major events. On the iReport homepage, there is a section named “Assignment Desk.” By clicking on any of the popular, pre-selected news topics, users can contribute their videos, stories, and opinions to the collection of user-generated content. Outlets like iReport not only invite ‘amateurs’ to contribute to popular news stories, but they also provide varied perspectives often unavailable from the newsroom alone. For example, if I wish to learn more about last year’s Hurricane Earl (there are always up-to-date “assignments”), I might be click on the appropriate iReport link where I can find users’ images, stories, and comments. As opposed to sending one journalist to cover the story, CNN has hundreds of reporters—contributing for free.

Even though the concept of iReport is along the same lines of other user-generated content sites like Wikipedia, there is one major set-back, indicated by the following “warning” that pops-up on each page: “The stories in this section are not edited, fact-checked or screened before they post” (CNN iReport). Unlike Wikipedia who employs staffers to sweep false material, iReport has a considerable gap between “vetted” stories, and ones yet to be verified. Interestingly, iReports does not “pull down” or “discontinue” the non-vetted reports, but only alerts users that it might not be entirely trustworthy. If iReports does not ‘take responsibility’ for users’ posts and yet still makes these available to everyone, then at what point does user contribution lead to irresponsiblity?

The future of memory studies must consider the growing likelihood that everyone will experience more events prosthetically. Sites like iReport encourage varied perspectives while at the same time providing a space for people to share their eyewitness accounts. As someone who does not live on the Eastern Coast, I visited iReport to see some snap shots of Hurricane Earl. There are hundreds of photos—large waves, sunsets, views of the storm approaching. Simply by flipping through the iReport photos, I experienced the hurricane prosthetically. In fact, I even (gasp!) viewed and (double gasp!) found the ‘non-vetted’ images more interesting. Even though the unfiltered photos were more interesting, because iReport invites stories from everyone, there are bound to be unclear, misguided, and untruthful representations of events. Moreover, CNN does not remove the stories after the event has passed, transforming the present-history making site into a digital archive of sorts. The possibility of unsound user contributions making their way into small versions of digital archives makes me wonder about the future of responsible memory.

In the essay “Essjay’s Ethos: Rethinking Textual Origins and Intellectual Property,” James J. Brown Jr. investigates the limits of an “originary” text through the lens of Wikipedia. Like iReport, Wikipedia thrives on user-contributed content. Unlike iReport, Wikipedia maintains its ‘credibility’ because it requires that updates are based on outside sources (which are linked to at the bottom of each page) and not professional or personal expert knowledge. Wikipedia ensures that so-called “expert knowledge” does not trump tried-and-true material. For iReport, “expert” knowledge is the main force behind the quantity of content and the success of the site. The difference between the two sites is that iReport relies on personal perspective while Wikipedia strives to be a composite of “pre-vetted” information. Brown argues that the Web in general, and Wikipedia in particular, “exposes the difficulties of intellectual property by making it difficult to determine where ‘my’ text ends and where ‘your’ text begins” (W239). For memory studies, determining what’s “yours” and what’s “mine” should be easy—after all, *my* memories will certainly be different from *yours*. This is not the case anymore, and sites like iReport point to an interesting shift in how we construct “my” memory from the collection “your” memories.

The result of participating in one collective memory network lies in the responsibility of contributions as well as responsible organizational methods for information. Once participants fully understand the consequences of their passive and active contributions to the memory network, then we might gain a better understanding of how contemporary memory creation functions. Responsible memory is not only content, but it is also ensuring accessibility, whether that means describing a site with predictable search terms or using favorable word tags.

Perhaps an alternative perspective on digital memory could be a blend of memory and invention. As research in the humanities as well as social and neurological science has suggested, if memories are heavily prone to re-creation, then memories actually become the productive site of invention. When we begin to question the originality – much less the origin – of a memory, that quest becomes quickly tangled. Instead of thinking of memory as either “mine” or “yours,” digital spaces encourage the production of collective spaces: “we” shape and invent “our” spaces together.