


AGENCY IN THE AGE OF PEER PRODUCTION



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SWR
STUDIES IN WRITING AND RHETORIC

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NCTE Stock Number: 00899

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Publication partially funded by a subvention grant from the Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vieregge, Quentin D., 1979-

Agency in the age of peer production / Quentin D. Vieregge . . . [et al].
p. cm. — (CCCC Studies in Writing & Rhetoric)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8141-0089-9 (pbk : alk. paper)

1. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching (Higher)—United States.
2. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching (Higher)—Technological innovations.
3. Report writing—Study and teaching (Higher)—United States.
4. Internet in education. I. National Council of Teachers of English. II. Conference on College Composition and Communication (U.S.) III. Title.

PE1405.U6V44 2012

808'.042071173—dc23

2012008163

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Introduction

WE BEGIN WITH AN EARTHQUAKE—an investigation of how peer production has shaken communication, education, and agency. Peer-production tools are shifting the nature of communication and collaboration in the twenty-first century, and this change is already transforming the ways students, teachers, and writing program administrators talk to or write with one another. Communication between teachers and students can occur through numerous channels now: in the office or online, synchronously or asynchronously. Administrators and students can contact each other much more easily, and teachers can share ideas and lesson plans individually or in groups. One effect of all these changes is that classrooms no longer need be thought of as discrete spheres, separated by four walls and a closed door from the rest of a writing program or department as soon as the first day of class begins. In other words, peer-production tools provide, at the very least, the promise—we recognize they also represent several possible pitfalls—of increased collaboration.

This book was born out of the hope that we could explore the implications of some of those promises and pitfalls through an introspective qualitative study. The four of us write as administrators and qualitative researchers. Our study focuses on a five-year effort to understand how peer-production tools—and, more important, the ideas and values behind peer production—influence the agency of teachers.

In this “age of peer production,” a phrase coined by Chris Anderson, words, images, videos, and sounds can be easily shared, debated, and developed over today’s networked computers. Instead of

feeling alone, isolated behind closed classroom doors, focused on books printed five, ten, even twenty years ago, today's educators can collaborate on documents, pedagogies, and assessments in unprecedented ways with peer-production technologies, asserting a teacherly agency by banding together to create ideas and practices that are better than the sum of what any teacher could have developed alone. The age of peer production can mean technological innovations such as wikis, blogs, and video-sharing and social networking sites; but we believe it also needs to include offline efforts such as mentoring programs, orientation meetings, brown-bag luncheons, and the general ethos of a sharing community. If peer production is to assume its own "age," then it must be more about values than about tools, which are replaceable and easily outdated.

Of course, things are never as utopian as we imagine they could be. This study tells the stories—both successes and failures—we experienced when we experimented with peer-production tools to fundamentally change the nature of composition teachers' agency at a large research university. We found that in many instances these technologies did positively affect the experiences of our teachers and students, as well as our program's standing in our university, but we also found that these tech-driven innovations had to be balanced by serious investment in developing face-to-face community. By investigating the changing nature of agency and communication through the lens of our experiences, we hope to alert other writing program administrators, university leaders, and classroom instructors to the possibilities and obstacles awaiting them as new technologies and attitudes shift traditional power relations.

We hope readers come away from our study with a set of practical guidelines and a more general theoretical understanding of how peer production works. We focus on both the practical and the philosophical because both forms of knowledge have their place depending on who is reading this book, when, and for what purposes. For the purposes of this introduction, we might think of this as everyday "know-how" knowledge versus more theoretical "know-why" knowledge. Our interview chapters are aimed at the particular and idiosyncratic experiences of our program's administrators and

instructors. Throughout these chapters, and especially at the end of each one, we reference the everyday, evolving, know-how knowledge. We tried some things; sometimes they failed, so we tried again and they worked. Our program's teachers collaborated in inspiring ways, and so we asked, "How?" This knowledge is intuitive and incremental. To the extent that our readers share similar programs or interpersonal dynamics with teachers and students, they may gain from the know-how. In Chapters 1 and 5, we theorize about the know-why. Rather than create a single monologic concept of agency, we offer several characteristics and patterns that represent a theory of agency in the age of peer production within the context of university writing programs. The final chapter also generalizes some of the know-how lessons.

Part of what catalyzes the story of our program is the push and pull between teachers and administrators. The subtext of our book is the friction that exists—and the sparks that sometimes fly—when the need for individual agency among instructors meets the necessity for a shared curriculum. The book and the program on which it is based are in part an experiment about whether these two forces can be compatible and even mutually reinforcing in the age of peer production. Is it possible for both individual and communal agency to coexist, and if so, what kind of underlife, or unofficial connections and networking, might emerge from that relationship? Perhaps many instructors in large first-year composition (FYC) programs—specifically those at research universities where graduate students and adjunct instructors teach most sections—share these concerns. These instructors may face a set of seemingly impossible tasks: they must show themselves to be creative teachers within the confines of department syllabi; they must support university and assessment policies while trying not to “teach to the test”; they must lean on the newest and best composition pedagogy and theory without sacrificing their own particular pedagogical goals; and they must adapt to ever-changing program requirements without losing the work they've put into each of their classes. Since many of these instructors have training outside the field of rhetoric and composition, they must work in two scholastic worlds, bring-

ing to the classroom their knowledge in literature, creative writing, or communication while at the same time learning the composition pedagogy they might not be familiar with. But they believe in the mission of their university. They want to play along without being *pushed* along. They want to assert their own agency without completely delegitimizing the agency of their programs, departments, and colleges.

In smaller two-year or four-year schools there exists, if in different ways, the same tension between the agency of the teacher and the need for overarching programmatic goals. In such schools, the majority of the instructors may have decades of experience and be well versed in many different writing pedagogies. Unlike in large state universities, there may be little or no need for training inexperienced graduate teaching associates, for scaffolding instructor training with standardized syllabi, or for as much top-down administrative control. But a community of experienced faculty still needs to develop a shared curriculum. The benefits of collective intelligence remain. Such departments may still feel the need to make certain the first-year composition experience feels like a coherent whole either across sections or from the first semester to the second semester. They may value a collaborative pedagogical atmosphere in which teachers share lesson plans, teaching methods, strengths, and struggles. Each course may share a similar set of objectives or learning goals between its individual sections, even if the faculty approaches those objectives in creative ways. These demands would require teachers to balance individuality with collaboration, the expression of their unique talents with the need for a shared curriculum. Furthermore, these departments and their instructors may benefit from the “wisdom of the crowds” and collective intelligence, which are afforded by peer-production tools (Surowiecki).

Chapter 1 introduces the broad societal importance of these peer-production technologies, considering how the seismic shifts in how people collaborate intersect with questions of agency—questions of how power relations are affected when everyone has the theoretical and computing power to speak in a conversation. We introduce here our dual vision of agency, a dialectical relationship between

individual and communal power. Chapter 2 then moves from these broad discussions into the specific contexts of our university and our FYC program, including our budgetary constraints, our efforts at building a teaching community, and our program technologies. This chapter also describes the methods used to collect the stories told in Chapters 3 through 5, which rely on teacher interviews and archival data collected at our university.

Chapters 3 through 5 focus on our primary research, including surveys, listserv archives, data from our online rubric, usage statistics from our program's website, and the interviews we conducted with our instructors over the course of a year. Chapter 3, the first of our interview-centered chapters, describes our efforts to create a culture of assessment based on our online rubric tool. We contrast our own expectations and objectives when we started the rubric with the initial and subsequent responses by graduate students and adjunct instructors as they began to grade with it. In Chapter 4, we study how our instructors formed self-guided groups while learning how to teach in our technology-heavy program. We asked them to identify themselves in terms of their level of technological and curricular innovation and how their self-identification related to the organic groups they formed in shared offices and in the halls. These groups are the centrifugal forces that push outward, away from administrative control. In Chapter 5, we contrast these groups with the centripetal forces exerted through our mentoring program. The mentoring program attempts to blend face-to-face and online collaboration to guide incoming graduate students new to our program and to teaching. Chapter 6 sums up our vision of this ecology's elements along with a series of specific suggestions for how other composition programs and networked organizations can learn from our successes and shortcomings. Following a year of qualitative research, which has involved in-depth interviews with twenty-six instructors, survey results from thirteen more, and a review of our archived emails and surveys since 2004, we have found that face-to-face interactions and our mentoring program are a crucial part of our online efforts to encourage agency, community, and a shared curriculum.

It was critical for us to tell these stories from the dual perspective of our teachers and ourselves as staff of the FYC program; the big-picture perspective of administrators is necessarily different from the viewpoint of those who actually experience the day-to-day difficulties of following (and subverting) orders from above. We report our examples multivocally by quoting our teachers within our own big-picture explanations. In this sense, a book cowritten by four individuals, each with full drafting and editing abilities on each chapter, is beneficial, as it reflects the emphasis on multiple perspectives that is at the heart of the book—and, indeed, at the heart of our vision of how power can be shared and enhanced by collective action. The voice of our writing program administrator, Joe, is joined by those of three advanced graduate students, Quentin, Kyle, and Taylor, all of whom taught extensively in our FYC program as well as labored to develop its curriculum, Web resources, and community in different ways over multiple years.

But let us examine these tectonic shifts in agency and peer production in more detail.

Peer Production and Tectonic Shifts in Agency

How do commons-based peer-production tools alter how teachers and writing program administrators find agency—that is, broadly speaking, the ability to affect change? How might peer-production tools be used in educational settings, particularly writing programs, to enhance teaching and learning, avoid “coursecentrism,” and foster both communal and individual agency?

OVER A DECADE INTO THE twenty-first century, literacy practices are changing seismically. Thanks to new writing spaces, we are redefining what it means to read, research, write, and share texts. These texts take the form of new genres that emerge in response to new media, such as hypertextual poems, cell phone novels, and collaboratively written essays or song lyrics composed online with strangers. Everyone now has an opportunity to be a Thomas Paine or Johannes Gutenberg, to espouse an individualized common sense through a blog or website. Aphorists pen new witticisms on Facebook for friends and email is seen by first-year students as an “old” way to write. The landscape of literacy has shifted underneath our feet, and we are only just beginning the job of the cartographer, redrawing—for the first time in hundreds of years—the maps of how classrooms will dramatically change. This literacy transformation inevitably impacts who can effect change, who can have agency, and how, and even where, literacy instruction should take place.

Social networking and peer-production tools are overlapping but distinct phenomena that create new communities online and provide opportunities for communities to exist offline. Social networking sites typically connect friends, colleagues, and those who

share common interests by helping to form groups that otherwise might never coalesce; just as often, these sites maintain relationships that might grow cold or distant without an online dimension supporting them. Social networks encourage personal expression and the viral spread of ideas through sharing a hashtag or following a colleague on Twitter, joining a cause on Facebook or subscribing to a channel on YouTube. But social networks are also like digital Rolodexes: they provide easy access to a lifetime's worth of acquaintances who, simply because of their close digital proximity, may later become one's future collaborators. The most obvious examples of social networking sites—Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn—appear to some to be associated with a youth-centered American culture, but these sites are quickly burning cultural borders and age boundaries. For instance, Facebook reports its “fastest growing demographic is those 35 years old and older” (“Statistics”). The website exceeds an online population of 750 million, and one out of every two of those users logs in daily. With photos, notes, new stories, and links counted in the billions, and millions of videos, Facebook is a repository of information. The site can be read in scores of languages, and surprisingly, most of Facebook users live beyond the boundaries of North America. And these numbers change rapidly; since this chapter was first drafted and later edited, Facebook's statistics page announced an increase of 300 million users in a single academic year. When you read this, the numbers will surely have blossomed again.

At the same time, the rise of peer-production tools has mirrored the growth of social networking; individuals increasingly turn to robust computer networks for friendship, collaboration, and meaning making. Peer-production technologies have attributes similar to those of social networking sites, but instead of encouraging personal expression, the viral spread of ideas, and networking, peer-production communities are more like twenty-first-century barn building (Benkler and Nissenbaum 395). These tools allow for massive acts of collaborative creation by asking for just a little effort from each contributor. As espoused by both scholarly authors (Benkler; Brown and Duguid; boyd and Ellison; Cummings and

Barton; Jenkins) and trade book authors (Li and Bernoff; Gillmor; Tapscott and Williams; Weinberger), peer-production tools democratize power, redistributing the means of production from a one-way communication model, like a CBS broadcasting tower, to an increasingly community-driven model, in which individuals contribute freely and democratically. Some well-known examples of peer production include the now ubiquitous Wikipedia, the crowd-sourced operating system Linux, and the news aggregator Slashdot, where people share and comment on technology-themed articles they've discovered (Benkler and Nissenbaum 395–98). These are all sites where large groups share resources or ideas for a central purpose (or many networked mini-purposes), giving individuals the ability to participate in large-scale action. As Chris Anderson noted in 2006, we've landed in the age of peer production.

Peer-production technologies are more powerful than they might at first seem: they allow users to add content, which affects the way knowledge is constructed. Popular online communities have altered how communities are established; how individuals define themselves; how knowledge is created, published, and disseminated; and how friendships are defined and constructed. Wikipedia editors write, link, and comment on texts knowing that they can expect a significant readership (including, of course, Wikipedia's community editors, who track changes and occasionally undo changes) (Benkler 72). Contributors to YouTube create channels, promote the work of others by linking outside of the site, and receive commentary from viewers. Amazon and eBay users can promote or marginalize sellers by positive or negative commentary, creating winners and losers in the global marketplace through the aggregation of common wisdom (Benkler 75). SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) is a project that aggregates the processing power of millions of personal computers to analyze "data sets collected from large radio telescope observations" (Benkler and Nissenbaum 396). These peer-production communities have reshuffled power relations, enabling individuals to influence the shape and direction of modern life, world markets, elections, and public opinion about seminal matters such as global warming and energy policies.

Perhaps the most intriguing idea to emerge from the evolution of social media and peer production is the possibility of collective intelligence, the notion that crowds of people working collaboratively by means of an online tool such as Wikipedia can create ideas that are unique and smarter than the ideas of individuals. James Surowiecki, George Siemens, Henry Jenkins, and Howard Rheingold have all theorized that peer-production tools empower users to create a new “emergent” knowledge that individuals working alone could not develop. Peer-production technologies change the ways we exchange ideas, organize ourselves, and create knowledge (Weinberger; Shirky; Jenkins); encourage democratic decision making (Benkler; Shirky; Rheingold); transform how people write and think about themselves (Lanier); and encourage ethical behavior (Benkler and Nissenbaum). It’s only natural, then, that they also change how we organize our institutions of higher learning (Taylor).

PEER PRODUCTION IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

As writing program administrators (WPAs) at a large state university (hereafter called Research University [RU]) responsible for teaching two courses of first-year composition (ENC 1101 and ENC 1102), we were especially curious to learn how to adapt our curriculum to respond to new literacies, collaborative tools, and modes of knowledge making. Equally challenging, we wondered how we could employ peer-production tools to open classrooms to informed collaboration between instructors. And beyond using peer production’s online innovations for classroom collaboration, how could the offline, face-to-face efforts of peer production be used to create a general ethos of sharing needed for twenty-first-century instruction? We were curious about the ways these tools could reshape the role of WPAs and teachers.

Hence, in fall 2004, we began using a variety of peer-production tools to develop a shared pedagogy that relied on the contributions from our teachers and students. Rather than follow the traditional top-down hierarchical structure of a writing program, in which tenured faculty define a curriculum or import one from publishers

or theorists, we hoped to develop a datagogical model: a collaborative model for pedagogical innovation that enables everyone—tenured and adjunct faculty, graduate students, and even undergraduates—to engage in an ongoing effort to refine and improve our curriculum, based on dialogue, argument, and evidence (Moxley, “Datagogies”). We hoped that these peer-production technologies would allow us a fresh way to increase the opportunity for democratic decision making. For instance, composition programs have often valued voice and a socially constructivist pedagogy; they have emphasized decentralizing power, democratizing knowledge, and creating connections between various disciplines (Shor and Freire; Gunner, “Collaborative”). Our use of wikis in the writing program, for instance, was an example of collective groups of individuals coming together in a way that diminishes (though does not eliminate) the influence of traditionally silencing power structures. Transparency comes in the form of the history pages on wikis that carefully document every change made by each user and allow users/editors to revert to older versions of texts. Discussion boards also maintain transparency, by invoking dialogue and calling for users to justify their content changes inside the digital public sphere. Moreover, by making programmatic decisions contingent on rational discourse, we decentralized power so that decisions could then be made based on dialogue and argumentation rather than authority. In this sense, our digital public sphere harkens back to Jürgen Habermas and his discussion of the transformation of the public sphere. One of his arguments is that the Enlightenment brought about a bourgeois public sphere, “in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” (25–26). This public contested the decision-making authority of the “prince” and of the “ruling estates,” pressing for reasoned debate as the foundation for political power. Thus, the sphere of public authority and that of the private realm became intertwined. We viewed our peer-production technologies as furthering a Habermasian model of public discourse by decentralizing power and encouraging debate.

Initially, we hoped our primary writing portal would represent an online market street, with each merchant bringing his or her own specialties: worthwhile activities to engage recalcitrant students, worksheets that help teach thesis statements, ideas for introducing the concepts of style and voice, annotated lists of movies for a film ethics project, links to websites that easily explain rhetorical terminology, or new YouTube videos that spark teachable moments. Teachers would exchange ideas in this city square, watch videos of best practices by other instructors, and cowrite the curriculum online, guided by common shared outcomes, course policies, mission statements, and governance documents. This city square would not adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude: administrative voices would frame online academic conversations around institutional concerns unfamiliar to instructors. For instance, an instructor's idea to introduce a memoir or social action project would be discussed in terms of the writing program's relationship to RU's general educational curriculum. Likewise, complaints regarding resources would be reframed as administrative requests for technology funding. Certainly not everyone would be an equal contributor—some would shop, others would sell—but our digital space would have a cultural currency. Whenever instructors had or needed an idea, they would go to our program's website. Rather than a marketplace tied to gold, our marketplace's ethos would be that of a "gift culture," and the currency would be academic pride. Of course, our metaphor of the marketplace implies money as the animating force behind it, and this obviously contradicts the objective to create a "gift culture" within the program. But this seeming contradiction is exactly the point: we were hoping peer-production tools would be a game changer, something that would transform the well-worn business motto "What gets rewarded, gets done" to a variation on President Kennedy's famous call to action, "Ask not what your colleagues can do for you but what you can do for your colleagues."

We pursued these hopes with a variety of peer-production tools, including an extensive public website, a password-protected intranet accessible solely by our teachers, a listserv, and a gated online

assessment tool.¹ We also supplemented these tools with nontechnical, community-building events, including an extensive mentoring program, a two-week intensive orientation program, instructional videos, podcasts, newsletters, and various other face-to-face community-building and training activities, including softball games, brown-bag lunch presentations, kayaking and rappelling adventures, and guest speakers.

Between 2004 and 2009, however, we increasingly realized that engaging writing program faculty in a shared effort to develop a sound pedagogy was much more complicated than first presumed. Our marketplace of ideas had fluctuated between vibrant and anemic depending on the time of year, our instructor population, the usability of our websites, campus politics, and program funding. We could identify some successes and some disappointments. When we took an honest look at who participated, it seemed that a core group of graduate students and adjuncts was collaborating with one another to develop our shared pedagogy, revise our curriculum with a focus on outcomes, produce textbooks, develop new major writing projects, edit old projects, rewrite program policies, offer training sessions for other instructors, and contribute to the development of our online rubric tool. During these first six years, this core group of instructors assumed unprecedented leadership roles in the writing program. Happily, some of these leaders presented their contributions at professional conferences, in published papers, and during job searches.

Yet from ongoing talks with instructors, we were also made aware of significant failures—failures that at times made our hopes of creating a gift culture seem too Pollyannaish, failures that at times made us want to return to more traditional hierarchical models. Why? Even after six years of daily effort, we found that the majority of instructors resisted our invitations to participate in our community, either online or face to face. From informal conversations with instructors, we found some had mistaken our emphasis on shared outcomes as an effort to homogenize instruction—to control them rather than engage them in sustained dialogue about best practices.

Even with a variety of opportunities for collaboration, program critique, and development, some faculty still resisted engaging with our writing program.

Without much effort, we could point to several possible reasons we could not engage the majority of instructors in our collaborative efforts. We knew, for example, that our emphasis on collaboration was a dramatic shift from the traditional view of the teacher in the closed classroom. Indeed, the degree to which a teacher has privacy in the classroom is often seen as a sign of academic freedom. Gerald Graff reflects on this tendency—one that he admits he shares—and comes to the conclusion that “we do not appreciate the educational damage that results from teaching in self-isolated classrooms” (“Why” 157). He calls this ethos *courseocentrism*, “a kind of tunnel vision in which we become so used to the confines of our own course that we are oblivious to the fact that our students are taking other courses whose instructors at any moment may be undercutting our most cherished beliefs” (157). What we viewed as freedom, the opportunity to collaborate on programmatic changes, was viewed by some instructors as an encroachment on their private classroom space.

We also understood basic impediments to their engagement. Many instructors did not use our peer-production tools because they lacked the necessary training—and, admittedly, some of the tools we had chosen were not the easiest to use. Also, we were well aware of the long history of teachers’ resistance to standardization. And we understood that the transitory nature of our community likely impinged on its overall effectiveness: most of our teachers graduate from the program or begin to teach higher-level courses.

Furthermore, we were aware that our experiences were similar to the experiences of other communities that have used social software; even though the Wikipedia community might seem at first glance to have engaged hundreds of thousands of users in authoring the online encyclopedia, the reality is that most pages are predominantly written by a small number of dedicated users—perhaps only 20 percent—while another 80 percent made minimal, if collectively significant, changes, a distribution of engagement so widespread

across human phenomena (e.g., economics, writing, collaboration) that it is sometimes called the “80–20 rule,” or Pareto’s principle (Shirky 126). The 80–20 rule has been a lens helping us understand human relations “since Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist working in the early 1900s, found a power law distribution of wealth” (Shirky 126). More recently, collaboration theorists have applied it to social software and any large organizational structure. For example, even though the ongoing development of various Linux platforms has involved thousands of users worldwide, only a “handful” of programmers produce the actual “core” program (Shirky 250–51). Consequently, we struggle to accurately reconcile the dynamics of the 80–20 rule with our program, and we wonder what factors motivate participation in our effort to develop a shared pedagogy. Intriguingly, the rule follows a *power-law distribution*, a term describing this kind of mathematical relationship and one that we find coincidentally appropriate, given our interest in how power is distributed across a composition program.

While we found the 80–20 rule to be reassuring, and while we recognized that our culture’s emphasis on individual achievement and theoretical scholarship could partially explain teachers’ reluctance to join our collaborative efforts, we wondered if many of the benefits of peer-production tools pertained primarily to nonmarket, nonhierarchical contexts as opposed to our academic context. After all, peer-production miracles like Wikipedia or Newsvine are global phenomena, “large-and medium-scale collaborations among individuals, organized without markets or managerial hierarchies” (Benkler and Nissenbaum 400). The power of peer-production tools employed by these communities does not necessarily reflect workplace relationships or learning communities within higher education, which are propelled as much (if not more) by pay, academic recognition, hierarchical control, and the pressure to publish.

Ultimately, then, we began this research because we wanted to do more than hide behind the feel-good implications of the 80–20 rule. If anyone ever asked us whether our effort was as successful as Wikipedia or other socially driven sites, we didn’t want to claim, “Oh yeah, we’ve got at least 10 to 20 percent of our teachers in-

volved in our shared effort to develop our curriculum, assessment, and program polices.” Plus, we wanted to see how well peer production could be employed in our workplace context, a large state university. When Yochai Benkler and Martha Nissenbaum wrote about the prevalence of virtue in peer-production sites, they focused on nonworkplace environments. These environments do not include several variables essential to a workplace setting, especially ones that can affect a group’s cohesion and motivation. Employees—as opposed to Internet volunteers—are especially concerned with financial compensation, career ambition, and compulsory obligations, and so we were intrigued to see how peer-production tools could be used to create a gift culture in this type of setting. After all, the ability to give a gift, whether in person or in a digital network environment, is in one sense the ability to act on one’s own, free from outside restraints. But in a university setting, faculty are always hampered by multiple, outside restraints, to both their benefit and their detriment. Therefore, how can individuals assert their own agency even as they are surrounded by the needs of wider communities?

INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL AGENCY

When evaluating our research goals, we determined that we wanted to analyze agency on at least two levels, the individual and the communal (see Figure 1.1). We hoped to learn more about the complex relationship between individual and communal agency that is at the heart of our program, because we realized our instructors daily meet multiple responsibilities to their students, the administration, and their own academic studies. At times some of these responsibilities—meeting common course objectives, teaching a shared curriculum, and collaborating during orientation—appear to work in contravention to an instructor’s desire to individually instruct his or her students with his or her own talents. In contrast, we also realized that our shared curriculum increased the credibility of the composition program by validating student grades and by showing that what happens within each classroom matches RU’s learning outcomes.



Figure 1.1. The elements of agency

Several rhetoric scholars have observed that the term *agency* implies two seemingly contradictory ideas: that writers have both free will independent of outside constraints and that their voices are determined by the institutions to which they belong. Scholars like John Trimbur argue that agency operates at personal and communal levels but see this seeming contradiction as an opportunity for individuals to effect change. James E. Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles argue that institutions are composed of humans who can rewrite the structures of the organizations to which they belong. They argue, “[T]hough institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced

by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable” (Porter et al. 611). Blythe, in particular, has argued in subsequent scholarship that “the paradox of agency” is that “[w]e gain it not by being an autonomous individual, but by being part of something larger, by being a part of systems that constrain and enable simultaneously” (173). Whether in the realm of business, journalism, or law, we could point to countless examples of how people find their voices individually and effect change by becoming a part of something larger—a force that works similarly in educational contexts (Blythe). For instructors to effect change and affect their worlds, they need to have both personal autonomy and communal identity.

One possible example of this dual vision of agency might be a blog carnival—a collaborative effort by different bloggers to approach a single topic on their own blogs and from their own points of view, with all responses collated into a single repository. For example, in July 2008, compositionist Derek Mueller wrote a blog post asking for submissions to a carnival discussing a recent article in *College Composition and Communication* (Mueller). Several scholars posted opinions on the article on their own blogs, each of which was linked from the carnival call page. Certainly, all of the participating authors enjoyed the discursive agency implied in the act of blogging: unrestrained by institutional demands, they were free to insert themselves into the story of the article and stake a claim in the scholarly conversation. However, the communal nature of the blog carnival added a new level of agency to the collection of blog posts. After all, a single academic blogger, even with a comparatively sizable readership, would be unable to have the impact afforded by the collective action of the carnival; the splash of a single post is necessarily smaller than the belly flop of a group of organized, intelligent, individualized-yet-connected posts all dropping into the ether of online space at the same time. Agency, in this case, is held both by individuals and by the group, depending on the observer’s point of view and focus. And ideally, teaching communities can work the same way, with the efforts of single teachers thriving both on their own and in the context of a connected, empowered group.

Hence, in 2009 to 2010, we employed archival, case study, and ethnographic methods to investigate what motivates composition faculty at our university to join, and feel agency within, our on-line and face-to-face teaching community. As a result, this research employs case study and ethnographic methods to investigate how social media and peer-production tools have impacted the agency of instructors, smaller subgroups within our larger community, and WPAs. We wanted to know whether we could leverage peer-production tools to develop a shared curriculum that preserves our academic freedom. If a writing program can aggregate the ideas, generosity, and contributions of each faculty member—regardless of experience—then there is an enormous potential to create a curriculum that validates the perspectives of many different instructors. Furthermore, using peer-production tools could help writing programs shape their own futures rather than having them defined by university administrators or state or federal politicians.

NOTE

1. This list excludes tools and sites that we have abandoned, such as a public wiki site, a public blog site, and a wiki site just for teachers.

This research study challenges some dominant but often unexamined assumptions in higher education—that standardization is “invariably anti-democratic and pernicious” and that academics don’t and shouldn’t share any core values. This story of the evolution of a first-year writing program provides a model example of how new technologies can be used to create a more transparent academic culture that students and others can actually decode, one still compatible with teacher individuality. As these program administrators struggle to serve the values of both individualism and collectivism through the use of online peer-production tools, their narrative goes out of its way to do justice to the inherent complexity and messiness of efforts to reconcile freedom and standardization in practice, and one of its signal virtues is that it doesn’t suppress or try to paper over the voices of dissent.

—Gerald Graff, author of *Chueless in Academe*

In this age of peer production, new technologies allow students, teachers, and writing program administrators to talk to and write with one another and assess writing in transformative ways. Teaching and learning are changing, as learning transcends the classroom walls, facilitating new networks, connections, and collaborations.

This qualitative study traces efforts to use social software and peer-production tools to engage graduate students, adjuncts, and faculty at a large state university in a collaborative project to develop a shared common curriculum for first-year composition. The study also tracks the early development of My Reviewers, a Web application designed to improve teacher feedback and peer review, as well as assess writing and critical thinking. The authors explore the impact that peer-production technologies have on power relations between students, teachers, and administrators, ultimately finding that peer production needs to include offline efforts that generate the ethos of a sharing community, and that the most technologically inclined members of a community are not necessarily those with the most transformative ideas. The ebb and flow of power, gift giving, and collaboration in this community of teachers reveals the importance of face-to-face interactions and shared values when introducing technological tools to further a shared vision. The results suggest that peer-production and social software assessment initiatives can facilitate both communal and individual agency in the context of a large university writing program.

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