Real World Competencies?: Practices of the Twenty-First Century American University and the Pedagogical Effects on Composition and Rhetoric

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– Western Governors University, Student Experience

Every semester on the first day of my composition classes I ask my students to tell me what they expect to learn. The most common response is something along the lines of “to be a better writer.” While I would like to respond, “I don’t know what that means” (and often do to some extent), through discussion I usually find out that my students expect to learn to write in a way that will help them find a job – which is, sadly, the answer I expect. In my first-year writing courses, there seems to be an overwhelming perception and expectation of a relationship between writing and the marketplace. My students cannot expand on what this writing is, what it looks like, or how it is done, but they seem to think it is somehow tangible, concrete and exportable. To many of my students writing, “real” writing, is not flexible, but the same in every situation and more of a ritual than an act of creation. While it may be fun to silently laugh at their naïve anti-intellectualism and hope their perceptions change by the end of the semester, students’ attitudes toward writing point to a larger cultural perception about the purpose of education, one in which writing and education in general are tied narrowly to finding employment. In thinking of my own education leading to college, this is not surprising; what is surprising, however, is how much higher education has begun to reinforce this perception and actually seems to agree with them. School, students are told, is instrumental to success in the “real world.”
Ironically, at the same historical moment when Johns Hopkins moved famously to model the German research university, creating a Modern American University of “pure” scholarship, the federal government began playing a larger role in American higher education. Land-grant colleges in the nineteenth century emphasized, as the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 stated, teaching agriculture and “mechanic arts” for the purpose of providing a practical education to the “industrial classes.” As early as 1863, with the establishment of the National Academy of Sciences, advisory boards for scientific research were established by the government to promote research and channel funding (Gumport 436). In the 1880s, roughly twenty years after the first land-grant colleges, the government began funding academic research more directly by supporting agricultural experiment stations. While there may be a perception of the University as an ivory tower, for quite some time academic culture in America has been intrinsically tied to society and the state, and it has always been, in some way, responsive to the needs of both. For as long as it has mattered, the university has been a place to educate and train a certain kind of worker necessary to meet the needs of society and the nation.

Though the expenditures of the state on higher education are and have generally been to promote national interests, it was not until World War II that the practice of direct funding of research was more fully developed. Before the war the funding of higher education was mostly indirect and the partnership informal; the needs of a nation at war, however, required direct funding of specific research. The Manhattan Project, advancements in radar technologies, and the polio vaccine all began in academic laboratories. The success of these
wartime programs resulted in the post-war creation of the National Science Foundation and a continued and greater federal investment in academic research. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades point out that research policy, by and large, has always been discussed in terms of “social contract” discourse, and the expense of continued federal funding of academic research was justified by arguing that through research and development society ultimately benefited from goods that came to the market as a result of this partnership (*Academic Capitalism* 46-7). While increased direct federal funding of academic research more closely linked the University, the State and the market, the model for funding established by Vannevar Bush, Roosevelt’s wartime director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, and the creation of the NSF also helped establish and maintain a running separation between universities and the government. Research under this model was funded by grants, and knowledge was developed in academic laboratories. The implications for commercialization were further developed in corporate labs, and the potential for government interests, specifically defense, were developed in government labs. Slaughter and Rhoades point out that Bush’s model was careful to create a “division of scientific labor” (*Academic Capitalism* 47).  

The National Science Foundation was not the only government agency or department to invest heavily in academic research after the war. NASA, the Department of Defense, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy and a number of other departments began funding research through the same grant model established by Bush and the National

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1 For more on Vannevar Bush and increased post-war federal investment and involvement in academic research, see chapter 2 “The Lessons of History” in Jennifer Washburn’s *University Inc.* and pages 435-440 of Patricia Gumport’s chapter “Graduate Education and Research: Interdependence and Strain” found in *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Altbach, Berdahl and Gumport.
Science Foundation. In fact, during the cold war and into the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense was the largest government sponsor of university research (Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism* 47). As the interaction and partnership between the two separate institutions became more involved, standard academic practice and convention was compromised. With regards to sharing information there were certain clashes between the cultures of academia, government, and corporations. However, the continual negotiation of social contract rhetoric with respect to partnerships between academic and larger social institutions justified the growing alliances, and the grant system kept a meaningful boundary between the university and the state.

Direct funding of academic research has not been the only way in which the University has been shaped by the growing partnership with the state. Probably since the implementation of the elective system at Harvard in the latter part of the nineteenth century, higher education has been conceived as a means of social advancement and an avenue into the middle class. Certainly, this perception has impacted and continues to impact the model and role of higher education in America. The government, beginning with the creation of a number of public and private universities through the Morrill Land-Grant Act and continuing with public policy today, has done much to foster this perception and generate greater individual access to higher education. But it was not until the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill, that higher education was made available to a greater part of American society.

Initially, the GI Bill was established to allow those who served during wartime a means of “catching up” to those whose lives were not halted by war. But as national interests and society changed after the war, a number of initiatives and programs arose generating a
need for more students to attend college and receive education and training enough to fulfill the needs of the changing nation. The launch of Sputnik, for example, generated a perception of the need for greater individual access to higher education for the purpose of national security and cold war competitiveness that resulted in Congress passing the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which provided low-interest college loans to students, including debt forgiveness if the student became a teacher (Gladieux, King, and Corrigan 174). The NDEA also funded higher education more directly by supporting foreign language and international studies, and was expanded later to include support for construction projects for projected increases in enrollments (Washburn 44-45).

Through the Cold War and into the twenty first century, access to higher education and having an educated working class has been a national interest for the government. While support has occasionally been reduced, during Reagan’s budget retrenchment in the early 1980s and other times of national economic difficulty, for example, commitment from the federal government to affordable higher education has increased dramatically, through the Higher Education Act of 1965, Federal Pell Grants enacted in the 1970s, increased tax breaks, subsidies, and federal student loans (Gladieux, King, and Corrigan 174-5). ²

Increased federal funding and involvement in higher education, formal and informal, direct and indirect, has influenced and shaped the American model of higher education, as have the growing market demands of society and the needs of the workforce created by new technologies. The university has been able through research grants to advance new

² For a fuller discussion on increased student funding for higher education since World War II see pages 174-180 in Gladieux, King, and Corrigan’s chapter “The Federal Government and Higher Education” in American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Althbach, Berdahl, and Gumport. See also Chapter 2 “The Lessons of History” in Jennifer Washburn’s University Inc.
technologies and, through federal student aid, to generate a workforce with the abilities desired by the evolving labor market. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades describe this kind of interaction as the “public good knowledge/learning regime.” They describe this public good regime as valuing academic freedom and the “free flow of knowledge.” This model, like Vannevar Bush’s, allowed knowledge created within the disciplines of the academy to ultimately lead to the public’s benefit while also maintaining a strong separation between the public and private sectors (Academic Capitalism 28). As Slaughter and Rhoades argue, the purpose of this century-long investment by the federal government was always to serve the public good as effectively as possible. In the Twentieth Century American University knowledge served larger social ends. And, though funding did influence the research conducted at universities, provisions were made to ensure that social pressures, especially those representing narrowly defined interests, did not shape research projects.

But the interdependence between academia, the federal government, and the private sector, always changing in small ways but generally stable for most of the twentieth century, has begun to shift dramatically in the twenty-first. The long-term dependence by Universities on federal monies, not just for continued research, but to make education affordable as well has clearly intensified: Federal expenditures on academic research increased almost 90 percent between 1980 and 2000 (Gladieux, King, and Corrigan 170). Between the 1980-81 academic year and the 2002-03 academic year, average tuition costs, adjusted for inflation, have increased almost 145 percent at public and private four year institutions, while during the same period median family income has only grown 23 percent (Gladieux, King, and Corrigan 177). Along with a changing global market, continued and increased interaction between the University and State have laid a foundation and set a
precedent for what is becoming the twenty-first century American university, wherein the boundaries between higher education, the state, and markets are blurring and the three systems increasingly are functioning as one entity.

Slaughter and Rhoades see this shift as a move away from the “public good knowledge/learning regime” toward what they call the “academic capitalism knowledge/learning regime.” They argue the academic capitalist model allows a greater integration between university, state and market and point to policy changes (beginning with the 1980 Bayh-Dole act, which allowed colleges and universities to patent their research and own products and processes that were federally funded), and academic practices leading into the twenty first century as redrawing and making more porous the once distinct boundaries between public and private sectors (Academic Capitalism 20-21).  

Under academic capitalism, Slaughter and Rhoades argue, colleges and universities are not being “corporatized,” as in external actors aggressively initiating changes – like pirates raiding a ship – but rather, institutions are purposefully adopting market practices and implementing them across the institution (Academic Capitalism 12). Commonly noted examples of these market practices can be observed in the way revenue is raised by outsourcing campus food services to fast food chains, charging students for parking, campus recreation facilities, and technology services, and contracting with athletic wear companies to sell products in campus bookstores with trademarked college logos. A number of other

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3 For more on the Bayh-Dole Act’s marketizing effect on higher education see Chapter 6 “The University as Business” in Jennifer Washburn’s University Inc. and also pages 124-128 of Ami Zusman’s chapter “Challenges Facing Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century” and also pages 495-498 of Slaughter and Rhoades’ chapter “Markets in Higher Education” in American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Altbach, Berdahl, and Gumport.
methods by which the student is treated as a consumer can also be seen in the ways
admissions departments are actively advertising to and recruiting more affluent students.

Within academics, however, institutions have begun to implement market practices in
less apparent and open ways, by patenting, owning, licensing, and trading research in a
variety of forms (from faculty and administrators owning equity in private corporations that
conduct business with the institution to partnering with corporations on research projects and
licensing the usage of learning management software). Under academic capitalism, colleges
and universities are not just adopting practices that raise external revenue, but they are also
adopting market models of operation like increasing managerial professional staff. There are
a growing number of middle managers in academia who are not just changing the internal
functioning of the institution, but influencing the curriculum and how education is provided.
Slaughter and Rhoades recognize the influence of the burgeoning level of middle
management in areas of research and technology like the licensing and operation of
information technologies and learning management systems like Blackboard, Angel, and
WebCT, and expanding offices that once dealt with corporations over an institution’s use of
copyrighted products and services now oversee the commercialization of university research
(Academic Capitalism 19). Slaughter and Rhoades point out too that as colleges and
universities become more invested in market activity through their research, funding for
research increasingly goes toward projects that have commercial potential. Research and
technology are not the only areas within an institution where middle management
increasingly affects the operation of the institution and the education it provides. Admissions
programs shape the curriculum in the credits they accept from AP courses, transfer credits,
and courses taken from other institutions – be they on physical campuses or online.
Extended learning departments also influence the level of education provided and the means by which it is provided as colleges offer more courses online or through satellite campuses. The role faculty play in shaping the education provided by the institution is also decreasing as non-faculty professional staff have become more embedded in the university structure. These non-faculty professionals have become such a part of the university that professional groups like Association of University Technology Managers, Association of Collegiate Licensing Administrators and Association of Marketing Professionals have developed (Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism* 28).

Another part of the process of shifting toward academic capitalism has been the strong economic influence of globalism. Bill Readings, who wrote *The University in Ruins* in the mid 1990s, observed that the power of the nation-state was declining as the economic power of transnational corporations was increasing. As a result, Readings recognized, the bureaucratic arms of universities began to mirror the functions of transnational corporations (45). He observed that as the power of the nation-state was decreasing, the modern university, which was founded in promoting a national culture and produced subjects of the nation-state, was instead beginning to produce consumers (48). This resulted in a shift not only in the operation of the University, but in the basic philosophy of the University.

There has always been a connectedness between the state, the university and markets, and when one undergoes a significant change, the others must change as well. Globalization may be an important driver in the changing economy, but an important feature of the global economy and instigator for change for American academic institutions is the disappearing barrier between public and private sector. These institutions come close to operating as a single entity as federal money is provided for research that is conducted at universities,
which is effectively a means of subsidizing the corporations that partner with universities as corporations develop products from the research to bring to market. As these entities come closer to operating together they form what Slaughter and Rhoades and others call “new knowledge networks.” Slaughter and Rhoades write that more and more the peer review process includes degree holders who work in industry as well as academics in the field, and scholars from industry sitting on peer review programs for the National Science Foundation have increased as well (*Academic Capitalism* 23).

Increasingly, the perceived value of research is not for the sake of advancing knowledge, but for its currency as a private, exchangeable good – knowledge is valued for its marketability and ability to generate profit, ultimately shaping the direction of research. Privatization of knowledge undermines the values of the public good as research and faculty become accountable not to the discipline, but to the aims and mission of institutions, and also serves to stymie accessibility to new knowledge and discoveries and limit academic freedoms.

The change in academic practice as well as the changes to the interaction/cooperation between public/private sector has resulted in a twenty-first century American university, different from the modern American university. If for the modern American university the creation and dissemination of knowledge for the public good was the basis of education and scholarship, for the twenty-first century American university scholarship is defined by the ability to create and disseminate information that will be marketable in the global economy.
From Cradle to Career: A Study of Education Values of the Twenty-First Century

American University

Western Governors University is one of the colleges that best exemplifies education as job training and the new synergy between the University, the State, and marketplace. Formed in the late 1990s, governors from nineteen western states created an online university to “expand access to higher education through online, competency-based degree programs” (Western Governors University “About WGU”). Perhaps established with some of the same utilitarian intent as Land-grant colleges, to bring affordable education to the frontier, in this case, rural areas of large (land mass) states, Western Governors University is different from traditional colleges not only because it is wholly online, but because their approach to education is “competency-based.” As the university was being created, WGU consulted with Google, Oracle, and Tenet Healthcare to find out what employers want from college graduates as they transition into employees. WGU then created assessments to measure skills in content areas.

Coursework at WGU revolves around content determined by “relevance” to a career. WGU “train[s] [the student] to be competent in [their] field,” and by doing well enough on a pre-assessment test, students can pass out of the real assessment course altogether. WGU describes this as a “‘show me what you know’ approach that lets you take advantage of knowledge you already possess” (Western Governors University “About WGU”). WGU uses the internet to “unbundle” instruction. Multiple choice tests are graded by computer while essays and papers are graded by separate graders. Faculty members act more as mentors whose purpose, according to Bob Mendenhall, president of WGU, is to “guide,
direct, counsel, coach, encourage, motivate, [and] keep [students] on track” (qtd. in DIY, 101). The faculty mentors are evaluated on retention rate, graduation rate and the success of their students. The actual instruction takes place through online learning modules – again, content specific to career. Dr. Linda Gunn, faculty mentor at WGU says: “We don’t really teach or instruct […] We guide them to learning resources and supplemental information to help them gain their competencies” (qtd. in DIY, 101).

Western Governors University – nationally and regionally accredited – is an extreme example of the information-as-knowledge network described by Slaughter and Rhoades, and also an extreme example of education-as-training. But as the twenty-first century American university develops, these models are becoming a greater part of higher education. In fact, there are many articles and books that view the shift toward these models as a positive change in higher education. One such book that lauds Western Governors University is Anya Kamenetz’s *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education*. Kamenetz views WGU as a “national innovator in assessment based education” (100) and sees the faculty mentor model as a more “efficient use of teachers’ time … [creating] a better experience for both teacher and student” (101). The argument of the book, and of others sharing Kamentz’s view (like Bill Gates, for example) is that the traditional model of place-based higher education impedes the student from acquiring knowledge that will lead to employment.

Online colleges and courses are not the only places of education where there is a greater emphasis on education as job training. There are also significant changes being made to the structure of higher education by college and university administrators, all of which affect higher education in a number of ways, not just in the type of education being provided,
how it is being provided, and its pedagogical implications across the curriculum, but also in how these policies affect perceptions regarding the purpose of education both within the academic structure and society at large.

In 2009 President Obama described as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act an initiative through which the government would “invest heavily in education” as a way to “provide jobs now and lay the foundation for long-term prosperity” (The White House “Education”). While this act addresses and commits to reform at all levels of education, from primary education to post-secondary education, one of the proposals is for the United States to have the highest proportion of post-secondary education graduates in the world by 2020. To accomplish this, the President’s plan proposes to expand financial aid and “invest in community colleges to equip […] young people and adults with high-demand skills and education for emerging industries” (The White House “Education”). The Department of Education has created what they call the “cradle-to-career education strategy” to begin implementing Obama’s proposals. While the majority of the initiatives are aimed at K-12 education, the perceived purpose of higher education is clear when the goal of having every high school graduate at a level ready to succeed in college and increasing access to higher education while also improving the college completion rate fall under an education strategy dubbed “cradle-to-career.”

President Obama’s education performance goals, in which higher education is a means to “better prepare [the] workforce for a twenty-first century economy” (The White House “Education”) certainly do not make him the first to view education as training for employment. In the changing twenty-first century university, however, the goals of “education as training” and the way in which it is provided are more focused. Such focus is
clearly evident in the public discourse of most university administrators, as in State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher’s most recent *State of the University Address*. While this address, by invoking public-good rhetoric and attempting to more firmly establish the importance of SUNY’s role in New York State’s economy, may aim to increase SUNY revenue from New York State and private corporations, the message Chancellor Zimpher sends about the purpose of higher education is that it is for creating and finding jobs while simultaneously acting with the market economy.

Zimpher opened her address with a quotation from Governor Cuomo’s *State of the State Address*, noting that Cuomo saw higher education as a “key economic driver” in the economic recovery of New York State (qtd. in Zimpher). Zimpher responded: “We are absolutely focused on leveraging our mission toward economic recovery and job creation for our great state” (Zimpher). Throughout the address Zimpher links SUNY to the welfare of the state, and not far into her speech she asks: “Who is more qualified than SUNY to navigate the knowledge and innovation economy and re-imagine the role of public higher education in our state’s economic development?” (Zimpher). Though Chancellor Zimpher is discussing the role of SUNY in the market economy, the direction in which SUNY is positioned to move is also the direction the rest of higher education is moving as a whole.

SUNY’s model for the re-positioning of higher education not only shifts the ultimate goal of education, but the kind of education provided as well. As jobs are created because of advancements in technology, a certain kind of educated worker is required to fill them. Higher education is in a position to provide this market need and SUNY, in regards to New York State’s economy, will, as Zimpher puts it, “answer … this clarion call.” Throughout her address, Chancellor Zimpher makes reference to the economy twenty times, jobs twelve
times, and the private sector, business and industry eight times. Conversely, in regards to education, the words “academic” and “intellectual” are never used. The only point in which there is a description of what education provides – “critical thinking, communication and analytic skills” – they are made in relation to “meet[ing] the technology and innovation needs of the future.” Though critical thinking comes close to what one considers an outcome of education, it has also become a watchword of the institution, and, as they relate to critical thinking, communication and analytic skills allow for only narrow applications of intellectual and creative thought.

On four different occasions Zimpher makes remarks about the “educational pipeline,” which is similar to the Department of Education’s “cradle to career” concept, in which education is conceived of as leading narrowly to a career. In fact, the address goes so far as to equate a four-year baccalaureate degree with an “academic finish line.” As the scope of education narrows to provide for workforce demands, so too does the educational model. In words reminiscent of the No Child Left Behind Act, Zimpher says: “Every child succeeds, no exceptions.” “Success” standing by itself, though, is unqualified and unquantifiable, much like Bill Readings’ “idea of excellence,” (*University in Ruins*) in that Zimpher’s use of success is an empty qualifier with no fixed standard of judgment. Success is given meaning, however, in the way in which education will be assessed under this new model. Often invoked and used together in this speech are “access” and “completion,” more students attending SUNY and more students graduating. As a baccalaureate degree is “the academic finish line,” Zimpher offers the statistic “for every 100 ninth graders in this state, only 19 will make it [to the finish].” How this “condition” will be “turn[ed] … on its head” is by

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4 For more on the hollow meaning of “Excellence” see Chapter 2, “The Idea of Excellence,” of Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins*. 
Goodwin 16

implementing “Performance-based resource allocation.” Schools will be evaluated “based on performance in critical areas like […] student course completion, retention and degree completion, […] and degree programs that address workforce shortages and the needs of emerging industries.”

Just as at WGU, higher education under this model becomes the “pipeline” Zimpher speaks of, education becomes job-specific training, and/or the scope of coursework becomes learning objectives that are defined narrowly by their perceived practical application to “the real world.” As a result, greater emphasis is placed on information-as-knowledge education. Recently, The Chronicle of Higher Education examined the extent to which features of this kind of education influence and create the curriculum of business programs. The article, titled “For Business Majors, Easy Does It,” reported that over twenty percent of graduates every year are given degrees that fall under the “business umbrella” and that many students approach college and business programs “in purely instrumental terms […] a plausible path to a job” (Glenn 4). Jerry M. Kopf, a management professor at Radford University in Virginia, admits in the article: “Getting students alert and motivated—even getting them to class … —it’s a challenge” (4). And according to the National Survey of Student Engagement, business majors spend less time than students in any other major preparing for class (paraphrased from “Business Majors” 4). The information-as-knowledge learning environment does not allow for engaging coursework, however. Business assignments ask students to examine case studies and, using narrow definitions, define problems and analyze why a company has succeeded or failed. The assignments lack context and serve as information transactions. Citing a paper from 2003 in the Economics of Education Review, Glenn wrote that the amount of coursework in business programs involving math and
analytic-thinking requirements has decreased and been replaced by “requirements related to computer skills and group presentations” (5). Though the education provided by business programs has come under scrutiny, roughly one fifth of all undergraduate students major in business-related fields, and large business programs have become a source of revenue for the institution. And though the programs themselves are ill-defined, they provide, if nothing else, practical skills needed for employment in the information society described by Slaughter and Rhoades.

The education-as training model and the increased emphasis on information-as-knowledge are not the only factors shaping the twenty-first century university; the changing demographic of the student is also having a profound effect on how education is provided and reinforces these educational models. In 2008 of the approximately 18.2 million students enrolled in degree granting institutions, almost 40% were non-traditional age – 25 and older (NCES “Fast Facts”). In January 2010 The Chronicle of Higher Education published an article indicating that colleges will need to have greater support for adult-learners for the US to have the greatest percentage of college graduates by 2020. Suggestions from Patrick J. Kelly, a senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, were to “schedule classes more flexibly … and provide a clear and direct path to a degree” (qtd. in Adult Students). Already, though, as increasing numbers of working adults enroll at institutions, the delivery of education has changed to fit the needs of this growing population of student, and this includes not only increases in the number of on-line courses available, but expansions in part-time, evening and weekend degree programs as well as increased accessibility through satellite campuses.
Of course, this does not mean we should resist attempts to democratize education, but there should be concern about the education delivered through these means, which, in the end, may not have a democratizing effect. The expansion of education outside the traditional brick and mortar institution emphasizes the kind of education provided by education-as-training and knowledge-as-information models, which also increases their presence in traditional campuses. Across the curriculum these models are taking shape and affecting the education provided. Indeed, as college and university administrators adopt market practices for the institutional operations, these behaviors have begun to influence curriculum in academic departments in regards to program learning outcomes and pedagogical practices. Because courses in composition are required of most students, and generally perceived as a cultural gatekeeper, certifying a basic readiness to enter the academy and perhaps the workforce presumed to lie beyond it, it is one of the curricular spaces most vulnerable to this influence.

The King is Dead, Long Live the King: The Continued Ascendency of Current-Traditionalism

The observation that many composition courses have long served as initiation rites for a kind of corporate mainstream is nothing new. James Berlin’s critique of the role “current-traditional rhetoric” (a term he used to describe instruction in objective writing that places reality external to the subject) played in shaping a new professional class for an emerging meritocracy at Harvard in the late nineteenth century has had as profound an impact on the field as any other piece of scholarship. Berlin noted early in his study that
comparative literacies are the “intermediary” between the writing course and the society for which graduates are being prepared (5). It is through this lens of literacy that he discussed the emergence of current-traditional rhetoric at Harvard and observed that composition instruction was “shaped” by the new elective curriculum which emphasized the scientific method and promoted a kind of utilitarian literacy (36). Berlin wrote that the positivist epistemology stemming from the scientific method resulted in a “rhetoric that denied the role of the writer, reader, and language at arriving at meaning, [and] instead placed truth in the external world” (36). This made writing an act of objective observation in which the role of the writer was to record and report reality to the reader. In this rhetoric, Berlin wrote, “patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness [are] the main ends of writing” (9).

Richard Ohmann’s observations about first-year writing serving as a kind of training for the “military-industrial complex” have likewise shown composition pedagogy to fall within the observe and report model of writing Berlin describes. In *English in America*, Ohmann examined a range of composition textbooks in an attempt to determine “what teachers think writing is and … how [they] present the subjects to their students” (143). The student, Ohmann found, is never defined beyond their studenthood; they are “classless, sexless though generically male, timeless” (145), and the purpose for writing comes from the assignment rather than from the student (147). If the student is isolated from the topic (assignment), then truth exists outside the student as well. Ohmann observes that in the writing situations created by these textbooks, the student can only write after “finding” a thesis, to which they “affix” appropriate “feelings and beliefs … with supporting details to be added afterward” (153). Ohmann notes that though pragmatic, writing in these situations is often trivial (154), and in examining writing “out in the world,” – memoranda and policy
writings of corporations and the government – Ohmann discovered the styles of writing are quite similar to those modeled in freshman textbooks. “Problems” – the focus of much of this kind of writing – are abstracted in much the same way textbooks abstract argument; “stated in the most general terms,” which remove arguments and problems from “real acts and people … reduc[ing] the world to data” (184), “a situation rather like the imagined situations of the freshman textbooks” (182).

As adamant as Ohmann’s and Berlin’s critiques have been, as universally as they have come to be accepted in Composition Studies, as varied as the other rhetorical approaches to teaching writing incorporated into the curriculum have grown since Ohmann and Berlin, in many ways the current-traditional ideal continues to be a prominent part of both writing instruction and academic expectations about writing. This is nowhere more apparent than in the models of writing found on standardized tests. It is in part for this reason that in recent years the greatest criticism of writing instruction has been focused on these exams and what they teach students about writing – though to little or no avail. Unfortunately, despite this criticism, standardized tests still have more to do with who is accepted into college and their course placements when they arrive than they ever have. They remain the gold standard of higher education’s measures of literacy.

The College Board claims the timed writing sample taken for the last seven years accurately assesses the student’s “ability to write concisely, coherently, and quickly” (College Board “The Essay”). The essay is scored on a scale of one to six (six being the highest), and an essay deserving of a six demonstrates “clear and consistent mastery … outstanding critical thinking, using clearly appropriate examples, reasons, and other evidence
to support its position ... clearly focused ... meaningful variety of sentence structure.”

(College Board “How the Essay Is Scored”)

The test taker is given a prompt like the one below and has only twenty-five minutes to think about it, plan, and write an essay fulfilling the above requirements.

Many persons believe that to move up the ladder of success and achievement, they must forget the past, repress it, and relinquish it. But others have just the opposite view. They see old memories as a chance to reckon with the past and integrate past and present.

—Adapted from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, I’ve Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation

Assignment: Do memories hinder or help people in their effort to learn from the past and succeed in the present? Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your reading, studies, experience, or observations (College Board “The Essay”).

In April 2005, in response to the newly developed writing section of the SAT, the NCTE published a report titled “The Impact of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests.” As the title indicates, this report highlighted concerns about the impact the new test might have on writing instruction in the nation’s high schools. These concerns included “the validity of the test as an indication of writing ability,” and “the impact of the test on curriculum and classroom instruction as well as on attitudes about writing and writing instruction” (NCTE). The concerns of the NCTE were well warranted; it seems that in recent years writing instruction has changed to fit the demands of this kind of testing. But it is not just the SAT
that is responsible for a changing curriculum. Many states, like Michigan, Ohio, California and New York, include a timed writing test on their state exams. And because of the emphasis placed on the results of these exams, it is natural that students would be trained to perform the kind of writing found on these tests.

The College Board claims “there are no short cuts to success on the SAT essay” (College Board “SAT Essay”) and would have us believe that a five-paragraph format or a large amount of writing will not receive a higher score. But the NCTE’s concern that “[t]he kind of writing required for success on the timed essay component of the SAT is likely to encourage writing instruction that emphasizes formulaic writing with specific but limited textual features,” seems more accurate, judging from the work of most observers who have reviewed the exam itself, inside and outside Composition and Rhetoric Studies. In “Information Illiteracy and Mass Market Writing Assessments,” Les Perelman, after reviewing sample essays published by the College Board, describes how he coached three high school seniors retaking the SAT to higher scores. The advice included adhering to the five-paragraph format, filling up the test booklet, and using big words. One of the students who scored a five out of six went as far as inventing information to support his thesis. And after being trained as an SAT reader, Karen Klein, a columnist for The Los Angeles Times, offers advice similar to Perelman’s in her article, “How I Gamed the SAT:” “Write at least a page and a quarter … Prepare a few highly burnished words … Prepackage some thinking. Get familiar with a couple Greek myths or literary classics that would work for multiple themes.” As a grader she also writes, “it’s OK to write something that lacks factual basis.”

The format of the essays found on the New York State English and Language Arts Regents Exam is similar to that of the SAT. The test itself consists of four essays and is
given in two three-hour sessions over two days. The fourth essay, the critical lens, is a quotation that the student must use to interpret two literary works of their choosing. While the student is given more time to respond to the quotation, enough perhaps even for limited, but actual thinking, many of the problems with the SAT essay are the same for the critical lens and the other essays found in writing exams of this kind.

Particularly because of the rubric and the way the state requires test to be graded, something formulaic in structure, like the five-paragraph essay, is clearly the best way to score a higher grade on the Regents, just as it is on the SAT. The essay, like the SAT, is graded on a scale of six points, and a response deserving of a score of six will “establish a controlling idea that reveals an in-depth analysis of both texts … develop ideas clearly and fully, making effective use of a wide range of relevant and specific evidence and appropriate literary elements from both texts … maintain the focus established by the controlling idea … [and show] stylistically sophisticated, using language that is precise and engaging, with a notable sense of voice and awareness of audience and purpose” (Session Two Scoring Rubric). The language of the rubric is different from that of the SAT rubric, but they are essentially the same. Which is why the advice Karen Klein gives in “How I Gamed the SAT” works remarkably well for the Regents: “Get familiar with a couple Greek myths or literary classics that would work for multiple themes.” Because such a range of students are taking these tests, they need to be accessible to any student no matter what they have read, which also makes it possible to answer any of the prompts using the same two works, as Klein suggests. Sophocles’ Antigone and Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mocking Bird, for example, are both broad enough to be used effectively to respond to the January 2009 critical lens, which was a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson “Fear always springs from ignorance.” Both
works could be used just as well to write the June 1999 critical lens essay, “In literature, evil often triumphs, but never conquers” as well as the January 2008 quote for the critical lens by Henry Ward Beecher, “Greatness lies not in being strong, but in the right using of strength …” (“Archive”). Students are not encouraged to authentically reflect on themes or ideas, or even personalize their writing, but rather to provide canned evidence to support general claims. The prompts for both exams are broad, generic and open-ended, and, as a result, leave little room for actual argumentation. The connection the writer has to the essay is minimal, as not just the topic, but the thesis is pre-formulated. The prompt creates a binary situation, and students are involved in the writing only to the extent to which they can provide “facts” that either support or disregard a claim.

The incredibly limiting time restraint further removes the student from their writing – twenty-five minutes for the SAT, thirty-five for the critical lens – leaving no time for personal investment in their writing let alone thinking; these restraints offer time enough for little more than “brain-pissing” – think five paragraphs and write anything that comes to mind. Since there is no time for complexity of reasoning or thinking, there is little call for complexity in the writing. Stylistically, too, only the most superficial writing can be accomplished, and students have time only to be concerned with rote organization and superficial correctness. So these tests and the pedagogy that stems from them teach student-writers that writing happens in instances, especially since the student does not see the prompt until the clock starts ticking. Writing, here, does not begin with perception or impulse, emotion or feelings, or even as a way for an individual to connect to their world. The takers of standardized tests do not come to writing after long periods of rumination or even with their own thinking; they come to writing only with a preparedness to put pen to paper.
Instant writing is further reinforced with the lack of possibility for revision. Once time is up there is no expectation to return to the work, and beyond a grade students have no connection to what they have written. With these tests, what students think and feel is unimportant, and how they develop their ideas or what conclusions they finally come to do not matter. What matters is the grade and how well they fulfill the requirements of the rubric. The act of writing for students is sanitized as they have no sense of ownership of the writing they are producing because writing in this system belongs to teachers and test graders. The intelligence of students is seriously underestimated if we think they do not recognize this. Students quickly learn that anything they might have to “say” is irrelevant, and that the emphasis of writing is only that one should “prove” a claim, whether they actually believe it or not. For students, too, writing becomes a mechanical process and a repeated task in which the only thing that changes from writing instance to writing instance are the particular claims they make.

There are other implications to this kind of testing as well. Not only does it limit and narrow a student’s view of what writing actually is, but it arrests the student’s development as a writer. In his article “Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests,” Chris Anson describes these timed essays as “closed discursive systems” which he defines as “one in which the activities admit little variation, are habituated over long periods of time, and learned through repeated practice” (115). Anson describes precisely the way students are trained to write for the SAT and the Regents exams. In the context of the writing for these types of tests there is little flexibility, but more importantly, as Anson explains, when writers find themselves outside this discursive system not only do they have difficulty navigating the new system, but they will “inappropriately replicate the habituated form” (115).
Of course, these exams are really a high school phenomenon: students take them in high school and they affect high school curricula most directly. But as Anson has pointed out, students internalize powerful lessons about writing from their experiences with these tests and as a result they carry narrow perceptions of writing and knowledge with them to first-year writing courses. To some extent, then, this shapes first-year writing curriculum. And even with as much criticism as has been leveled at these exams, higher education continues to be complicit in the system which produces them. The tests continue to be validated as scores from them are used in guiding the institution in matters of admissions and course placement. Even the essay on the SAT is a result of the University of California – one of the greatest consumers of the College Board’s materials – who indeed threatened to drop the SAT from their admissions process unless there was a writing assessment. The point is that higher education has some control over these types of examinations (perhaps more so with the SAT than state exams); however, as assessment and accountability becomes a greater focus for education, the emphasis placed on these exams only increases. And as administrators place more emphasis on easily identifiable and measurable learning outcomes, the lessons on writing and perceptions of knowledge these tests encourage will be reinforced in the student and influence their approach to learning and writing. Students will continue to think about writing with the same positivist assumptions Berlin worried over nearly a quarter of a century ago: “[P]atterns of arrangement and superficial correctness are the main ends of writing … [as] the business of the writer is to record careful [objective] observations or the observations of fellow observers” (9).

**Ideas and Ownership: Student-Writers and the Propertarian Instinct**
Nowhere is the degree to which contemporary students have deeply internalized these
tests clearer – taking up on the signals the larger culture offers about literacy from the
SAT and elsewhere – than in the way they approach citation. In April 2011, Inside Higher
Ed reported on a presentation given at this year’s CCCC conference by Rebecca Moore
Howard of Syracuse University and Sandra Jamieson of Drew University about their findings
with the Citation Project. The goal of the Citation Project is not to determine the extent to
which students are citing properly or not, but to understand how students are relating to and
engaging their sources. Howard, Jamieson and twenty researchers analyzed 164 student
research papers with a total of 1,832 citations dividing each into four different categories:
exact copying, patchwriting, paraphrasing, and summary (“Skimming”). The Citation
Project found that only 9 percent of the citations were summary, the rest of the 91 percent
hardly engaged their sources, and much of the citation came from sources five pages or less.
They also found students are not spending much time engaging sources, and the writing is
more a cobbled together of information (“Skimming”).

The Citation Project’s description of how students are engaging their sources is not
surprising. The way students have been trained to perceive knowledge – essentially, in
Berlin’s terms, as textual positivists transcribing external observations – makes it difficult to
actively engage with a source in any meaningful way. As knowledge exists outside the
writer, the role of the writer in the research process is not to create new meaning, but rather
to simply report to the reader what has already been written. The corporate influence over
education, which emphasizes knowledge as a commodity to be traded and the greater
pragmatic purposes for education, is consistent with this sensibility, and it makes it difficult
for students to understand how and why one would engage a text and research beyond the
level of gathering and disseminating information. If writing in general is about filling in blanks, research writing is about the exchange of already determined truths.

To be sure, in these collect-and-present papers the purpose for citation for many students is really a means of assuring proper attribution of ownership so as not to be accused of plagiarism. Quite often when students hear citation, the association they make is to plagiarism and simple textual theft – either you are stealing or you are not. These associations are, in part, reinforced by the inclusion of academic codes of conduct on syllabi that discuss academic integrity in general terms, and even by the materials we use to teach and discuss citation and plagiarism, like what may be one of the definitive manuals for writing research papers, Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers*, the title of which alone carries certain suggestions. The subtext of our discussions, that is, has more to do with rules and consequences than they do with teaching citation as an academic convention that allows one to come into a discussion and meaningfully and significantly engage sources and others’ texts and ideas. Hacker may demonstrate how to cite properly, but not what citation is for, why a writer might bother to do it, or what is even gained by it. Which is why Howard, in the discussion of the Citation Project’s findings, cautioned against taking a hard line against plagiarism, and offered instead that instruction should teach students how to “avoid it” (“Skimming”).

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5 One of the goals of The Citation Project is to “help educators move beyond the surface issues of citation, towards helping students become sophisticated conversants with source texts” (The Citation Project), which is what we should take Howard’s comment about “avoiding” plagiarism to mean. For a long time, too, Howard’s writings have been concerned with how students use sources in their writing. In articles like “Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty” and “Forget About Policing Plagiarism, Just Teach” Howard argues that issues of student plagiarism can be addressed by creating a pedagogy that allows the student to understand reasons for citation and in creating assignments that allow the student to be involved in the material and the writing process.
As we encourage students to engage texts and other sources with greater significance, they are finding themselves in situations where citation practices may not easily align with newer practices of research and use of sources, resulting in unintentional plagiarism or improper citation, and, really, difficulty in understanding how to engage a source. Academic conventions of citation have for a long time been tied to our notions of authorship and ownership, and in many ways these notions are shifting due to new technologies and greater interaction with a variety of media. At the same time, too, the commodification and quantification of knowledge in the larger culture and in academia suggest notions of ownership that limit interaction; the increasingly corporate nature of the web reinforces these notions, making understanding of citation conventions more difficult.

Emphasis on authorship and originality came into play when it became possible for writers to make their living from writing. Because of this, a shift in cultural attitude toward knowledge and information had to occur. No longer could a writer stand on the shoulders of giants; the writer had to offer something seemingly original and new. This forced the assertion of authorship into a text. The model of writing and reading became author-centered, one where the author held god-like sway and authority over knowledge and text. Roland Barthes, in “The Death of the Author,” writes that the “author is a modern figure, a product of our society” and contends that “capitalist ideology […] attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author” (222). When we allow the author to be god of the text, we read as if we are the detective in a detective story, piecing together clues to find who-done-it, or as Barthes writes, “the ultimate meaning” posited by the author. Barthes notes, “[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text” (224). By killing the
author, there opens new possibilities and meaning for reading. Barthes recognizes that the
writer works in a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them
original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable
centres of culture” (224). The living organism of text and quotations Barthes refers to is not
limited just to other physical writings, but is created through viewing the word through a
cultural lens; be it various media of art or the tavern, all become twined and presented to the
reader. The reader, too, coming to a text has experienced their own “multiplicities;” the text
is just one more, though relatively dense, experience.

In asking students to read and examine texts as Barthes suggests, we are asking them
to consider materials in a way they have not been trained to from within familiar positivist
models of literacy and in a way that does not match their understanding of the function of
academic research writing. Students receive mixed signals, too, from the larger culture,
especially online, where what Barthes calls the “capitalist ideology” of corporate authorship
and ownership increasingly control information. The extent to which our understanding of
ownership in regards to text, intellectual property, and originality are influenced by how they
are protected under law in the US is demonstrated in Kembrew McLeod’s *Freedom of
Expression* ®. Most telling may be the fact that McLeod was able to trademark the phrase
Freedom of Expression ®. Irony aside, the history of copyright in the US goes back to 1790,
when congress enacted the first copyright law designed to “promote the progress of science
and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to
their respective writing and discoveries” (qtd. in McLeod 8). McLeod explains that the law
was “designed to promote the dissemination of creative expression (8). However, this has
not been the case. There has, in recent years, been an increase in corporate control of
intellectual property and the exercise of copyright, restricting access to information (a development in which it is difficult not to see the echoes of Barthes’ critique about “capitalist ideology” and the control of meaning). As originally written, copyright law allowed for work to pass into the public domain after thirty-two years, but the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 extended the length of time the author retains copyright protection; for corporate authors US copyright lasts ninety-five years, and for individual authors it lasts seventy years past their lifetime (McLeod 7). Corporations and private estates fiercely guard the rights that current copyright law allows.

McLeod in *Freedom of Expression* ® shows how the guarding of copyright extends beyond the world of arts and culture and into most facets of our society, from scientific advancements and discovery to business practices like Amazon’s one-click checkout procedure. Today, if a company wants to streamline purchasing a product online with just one click they have to pay Amazon or risk being sued (6). Popular culture too becomes an arena ripe for protection of intellectual property. McLeod writes:

[r]eferring pop culture helps define our identities and cultural preferences. It also serves us with a kind of grammar and syntax that structures our everyday talk. In face-to-face interactions we can still refer to these intellectual properties […] without inhibition. (178).

Yet television and movies are not allowed to reference pop culture without first securing approval. McLeod quotes Richard Kelly, director of *Donnie Darko*: “[w]hen you go to make a film you have to clear any product placement—or any cultural reference. […] there’s attorneys that you hire specifically to protect yourself from getting sued” (qtd. in McLeod, 188).
The culture of ownership McLeod demonstrates ranges over the American intellectual landscape. Most students are probably aware of this culture, at least to some extent as it impacts their lives. It is doubtful many students are not aware of at least some of the control the music industry asserts over music rights, especially on the internet, for example. These laws and the practice of authority resurrect the author and create a disconnect for the student as they see both models in the world around them, Barthes’ “multi-dimensional space” and private authorship/ownership of information.

This disconnect presents difficulty for students as they try to practice proper citation. In print, text is static and authorship is fairly clear. A new and updated edition of a book could be printed, and the writer could use a pseudonym, but for the most part, book or journal article, the look and feel of a text is fairly similar. Authorship in print, for students, is more clearly established. As more of our research moves online as do more of our sources, our citation practices become less clear.

One of the largest obstacles for students with respect to citation, however, is that students do not see themselves as authors. Authors in their minds exist in the modernist sense, in that authors are the originators of information. Authors and information belong also to the corporate model, where what is written is owned by someone else. Citation practices, at their most basic level, reinforce the idea that information is not shared. The necessity of “giving credit” to the source of ideas does not allow students to see themselves interacting with texts and ideas or joining a discussion, but rather see themselves as clerks; they must gather and disseminate information regarding the topic they have chosen to write about. And the practice of clerking is reinforced in our models of instruction. Even when students are responding to a text or texts in original ways, many feel compelled to find a “source” where
an “author” has written something similar to what the student thinks in order to avoid being accused of plagiarism.

This need for a source encourages students to drop quotations or paraphrases into a text. There is no context or foundation to the quote, just that author “x” once wrote something. This practice is aided in part by the way reading and the gathering of information is done while online. Unlike print text, online text does not need to follow any sort of order; in fact, it generally does not. The format, style and flow does not need to follow conventional academic expectations. Generally, too, the depth of inquiry on a website does not nearly match that of a journal article or book. The more cursory nature of a website and the ease with which a student can move from site to site, or plug in another search, makes it easier for a student to cherry pick information or details that reinforce, support, or justify their claim. This cursory and unlinear nature, coupled with the ability to “surf” from page to page, does not encourage student readers to surround a discussion with a larger framework or context. Here again, there is a disconnect for students. The translation of information from online to print and paper writing does not match. Students are required to create a context for their discussion, to examine fully all the voices of their topic and to be sure that when they appropriate another’s text into their discussion, they give fair and proper representation of that voice and the context from which that quotation, or paraphrase, came. Students do not fully grasp the “interactions” they are being asked to perform because these interactions do not occur in their spaces of inquiry.

Student confusion and unfamiliarity with academic research practices is further muddled as our academic research moves away from the library and toward online resources. This is not a criticism; in fact, academic databases, as well as commercial databases, provide
avenues for research that traditional libraries cannot always provide, and, again, more quickly. When once we were confined to the journals our library housed and interlibrary loan, which could take days or even weeks or more to receive, academic databases and search engines allow immediate access to journal articles on a great number of subjects from a great number of sources. Blogs, wikis, youtube, listserves, etc., provide a larger network of resources for inquiry. However, as our research methods begin to more closely resemble basic searches online, students – understandably confused about the difference – may have difficulty discerning the validity of their sources, which only increases when the internet is perceived as an open commons. In appearance the internet is a kind of post-modern playground, similar to Roland Barthes’ multi-dimensional space “in which a variety of writings … blend and clash. The text [in this case the internet itself] is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (224). The internet allows us to create meaning from a variety of high and low spaces, from blogs and wikis to archived New York Times articles to academic journals.

However, when we examine the means of accessing information online we find it is less a Bakhtinian Carnival and more like Disneyland in that there is level of control over the way we search. There exists already, in all facets of society, a culture of control and authority, from restricting pop culture references in movies and television, to patents limiting scientific research and advancement. Online, this is probably most visible in the music industry’s battle over music rights. As this control manifests online, a disconnect is created between the idea of open commons and practice; however, it is probably this already existing and accepted culture of control that makes it easy to overlook the implicit control over how we access information online.
Google is claiming rights to our access of information. Google Books and Google Scholar have allowed Google to expand its access base into scholarship and the acquisition of this seemingly unlimited supply of information allows Google to be the authority of our knowledge, stewards of our information. Though Google may not “own” the information, we use Google to find it. There is no other search engine that offers the access to information, our information, to the extent that Google does. In this sense Google is a limiting authority of sorts and becomes similar to the god-author Barthes describes.

At issue, also, is that if we are to effectively search for information we must understand the algorithm and how the machine actually creates search results. To put it clumsily, we must either think like the machine, Google, or allow Google to think for us. With Google Beta, one not even need finish typing the words or phrase in a search string; a drop down menu with options to complete the string appears, perhaps nudging us in one direction or another regarding our inquiry. The more automated and “easier” the search process, the less authority we have over our research. And not surprisingly, because of its familiarity, academic databases are beginning to model the look and feel of their searches after Google. But the deep kind of inquiry academic writing demands is not in line with the easy nature of Google and the easy nature of moving about the web. This again creates citation issues for students; the particulars of citation seem unnecessary and perhaps archaic because accessing information is easy and finding sources (information) only requires an internet connection and a vague idea. Students’ limited engagement with their sources is also not surprising in this space. The maneuverability of the internet and the access it provides reinforces the idea of research as a collection and dissemination of information and creates a
disconnect between how we are asking them to interact with sources and their perceptions of writing.

Of course, academic convention itself commodifies scholarship in a sense. Academics trade on their reputations, which can directly and indirectly result in monetary gain through book deals, tenured positions, merit raises, or even just being granted a degree. In the academic community there is an understanding that we may freely use/address someone else’s work as long as it is represented fairly and accurately. The internet creates another interactive space where information and knowledge is transacted. We find ourselves in positions where we know we must practice citation. Our current practices, however, do not adequately address the new media in which interaction occurs, and because students are only beginning to understand academic research writing this translates into issues with citation and plagiarism.

Again, this lack of clarity does not help when trying to move students beyond the positivist approaches to writing learned from standardized tests and reinforced by the education values of the corporate university. Writing pedagogy needs to incorporate not just more instruction on how to cite properly, but needs also to emphasize what is actually taking place when we have a meaningful engagement with others’ ideas. This allows for more possibility for students to meaningfully explore ideas, their own ideas, rather than approach research as learning skills and knowledge practical to the “real world.”
One of the largest fronts in the changing and corporatized structure of higher education in the twenty-first century has come with the expansion of online instruction. The financial benefit is obvious; increased enrollment increases tuition revenue, online relieves the cost of maintaining a physical space, and coursework can be “unbundled,” in that a relatively small core of full-time faculty can create coursework and write curricula, and the content can be delivered by a pool of adjunct faculty. For all of the economic advantages it is probably not surprising that models of online instruction and delivery were pioneered by for-profit colleges, most significantly the University of Phoenix. The emulation and adoption of some of these market practices has had a profound impact on the quality of education online courses provide.

In May 2010 *Frontline* aired an episode titled “College Inc.” This episode, which aired again in March 2011, investigated an array of issues surrounding for-profit colleges. In one segment examining the advertising and marketing done by these institutions, *Frontline* reported that money spent on advertising “can rival or exceed what [is] spent on teaching” (“College Inc.”). Former director of the University of Phoenix, Mark DeFusco, commented that “anywhere between twenty and twenty-five percent of the total revenue of a [for-profit college] is in sales and marketing … [i]n most cases, the faculty in the ten and twenty percent range” (College Inc.). Defusco, when asked if he saw an issue with spending more money on advertising than on the student and education, compared the advertising of a for-profit college to a perfume manufacturer spending more on advertising than on the cost of the product. He then admitted to seeing no difference between selling perfume and selling
education and asked, “Is education special?” (College Inc.). In 2008 the University of Phoenix, the largest for-profit college, spent $130 million on advertising (Frontline). Their advertising budget allows them to reach a large audience (there are probably few people who have not seen the current “I-am-a-Phoenix” campaign). Though the University of Phoenix spends so much money on advertising, they are by no means the only college spending large amounts of money to attract students to their schools. These advertisements not only shape student and societal perceptions of what education provides as well as the means by which it can be provided, but their sheer ubiquity turns students (who according to the for-profit advertisements can be absolutely anyone) into consumers.  

The student-as-consumer is not anything new; beginning in the 1970s federal legislation shifted aid to higher education from a system based around institutional aid to a grant and loan based system (Slaughter and Rhoades, “Markets” 488). The rationale for doing so was that by introducing market discipline to higher education and making the student a consumer, institutions, in order to attract students, would have to provide better services at lower costs. When this market ideology was introduced into higher education, 

6 For-profit online colleges are not the only way in which the internet is being used to turn education into a product service. Traditional “in house” student services like tutoring can be outsourced to online companies like Smarthinking which allows students to submit papers for review – they will be emailed responses within twenty-four hours – schedule appointments where the student and tutor can discuss the student’s paper in a situation similar to instant messenger, or even just submit a question.

More than just tutoring, companies like VirtualTA, which was examined by The Chronicle of Higher Education in April 2010, shockingly offer a service that will grade and offer feedback on student papers. “Assessors,” as the company calls them, located in India, Singapore and Malaysia, communicate with professors through e-mail and are trained to use rubrics and “systematic guidelines” for evaluating student work. While these services may pose economic benefits to the institution, they raise questions about the quality of instruction and feedback the student receives, as well as whether or not this feedback is in-line with institutional philosophies. What’s more, by outsourcing these services, the institution loses a level of autonomy.
monies for student aid came mostly from grants; in 1978, however, when Congress passed the Middle Income Student Assistance Act – subsidizing student loans to any student no matter their level of income or need – student aid started shifting to a loan-based system, and now loans have become the largest source of financial aid (Gladieux, King, and Corrigan 180). In the 1975-76 academic year, loans made up 20 percent of federal aid; by the 2001-02 academic year 69 percent, more than $42 billion and three times that of Pell grants, came from federal student and parent loans (Gladieux, King, and Corrigan 180).

As the amount of money for higher education coming from loans increases, so too does the number of students attending institutions of higher education. Between 1978 and 2003 enrollment in higher education rose nearly 50 percent to more than 16 million students (Zusman 128). The dramatic increase in student enrollment and increased student aid through loans not only turns students into consumers, but also turns colleges and universities into marketers, as they can be more selective in the students they enroll. Slaughter and Rhoades point out the marketization of higher education was intended to create competition and better serve the student, but markets in higher education work like any other market, and they liken the higher education market to the housing market, which, instead of increasing competition, favors middle and upper-middle class customers who are less likely to default on loans (“Markets” 491). Because of this seller’s market, segmentation has resulted in which lower-middle-class students and working adults are increasingly having to enroll in “two-year colleges, four-year college programs with substantial distance education components, and for-profit institutions of higher education” (“Markets” 492). And in order to attract better students, colleges and universities have begun to adopt many of the same marketing practices used by for-profit institutions.
These practices were legitimized when the 1998 Higher Education Act redefined for-profits as institutions of higher education, no longer separating them from non-profit public and private schools. Along with being accredited, this new distinction allowed for-profit colleges to receive federal aid, and enrollment at for-profit colleges has increased dramatically, far more than the rest of higher education. Enrollment at for-profits has almost \textit{tripled} in the past ten years to more than 1.8 million students, roughly 12 percent of all college students who take in roughly a quarter of government student loans (Hamilton).

Though for-profits and traditional four-year colleges are not competing for the same students, the number of students enrolled in for-profit colleges and the amount of money coming in from federal aid validates the market practices of for-profit colleges and encourages non-profit schools to follow suit.

But even as the practices of for-profit colleges – specifically their recruiting practices – are increasingly being adopted by public and private non-profit institutions, for-profit colleges have come under scrutiny. In early February, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee began an investigation into the recruitment practices of for-profit institutions after the senate oversight committee obtained several internal training documents from various for-profit colleges. In an article titled “For-Profit College Recruiters Taught to Use ‘Pain,’ ‘Fear,’ Internal Documents Show,” Chris Kirkham, of the \textit{Huffington Post}, reported, as suggested by his title, these documents “encourage recruiters to increase enrollment by focusing on emotions such as ‘pain’ and ‘fear’ to attract low-income students who are struggling with adverse personal and financial circumstances” (Kirkham).

The article includes sample pages from some of these internal documents and Kirkham quotes some of the more apathetic passages toward students’ needs. From Kaplan:
“Keep digging until you uncover their pain, fears and dreams” (qtd. in Kirkham). ITT’s recruiter document contains a “Pain Funnel and Pain Puzzle.” The funnel consists of four levels of pain and a series of eight questions that lead down to the fourth level. At the end of the eight questions the document asks: “Does the prospect have enough pain to qualify for the next step?” (qtd. in Kirkham). A graphic of a funnel is included for the recruiter who cannot visualize the concept. From Vatterott Educational Centers Inc., Kirkham quotes the description of the target market: “We serve the UN-DER world, Unemployed, Underpaid, Unsatisfied, Unskilled, Unprepared, Unsupported, Unmotivated, Unhappy, Underserved!” (qtd. in Kirkham). A “Student Profiles” page lists the kinds of students Vatterott is looking for, some of which include: “Welfare Mom w/Kids;” “Pregnant Ladies;” “Experienced a recent Death;” “Experienced a recent birth;” “Dead end jobs-No Future;” “Recent Incarceration;” and “Physically/Mentally Abused” (Kirkham).

Ironically, even as so much critical and negative attention is focused on for-profit colleges, higher education continues to emulate their model for online instruction. In the twenty-first century economy, where information – increasingly conflated with knowledge – is a commodity to be transacted, the space of an online class can create a learning commons that looks equal to that of a traditional institution. A growing cultural technophilia, allows many to overlook some of the problems with online education, and the dominant discussions revolve around what technology can do for us, and what it will be able to do in the future, over its current shortcomings.7

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7 Instruction is not the only area of education finding space online. The populist perception of the internet feeding this larger cultural technophilia also allows for a potentially powerful mode of online management to be pioneered in the Open College Textbook Act of 2009. This Bill, submitted by Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois in September 2009 and again in 2010, attempted to increase college enrollment by reducing the high cost of
Many proponents for online instruction, like Lester Faigley in “The Achieved Utopia of the Networked Classroom,” a chapter from his book *Fragments of Rationality*, argue that the “digital classroom” moves toward being student-centered as the authority of the teacher dissolves. He contends that an online discussion elicits students to more freely offer their thoughts and opinions, come to their own conclusions, think critically and encourage participation without the fear of being judged by the teacher or other students. In short, the relative level of anonymity of an online discussion will give the student voice. Faigley in “Achieved Utopia” includes transcripts of class discussions in which he had minimal involvement and emphasizes that this environment encourages discussion by noting the number of discussion threads that came from his prompt. However, what is actually “said” by his students and what they took away from the discussion may be questionable.\(^8\) The students’ comments in the transcript were related to an essay they were all to read for class.

The Bill will “make high quality open textbooks freely available … [which would] significantly lower college textbook costs and increase accessibility to … education materials … that are more flexible, adaptable and accessible through the use of technology” (2.24-3.6). The reoccurring assumption is that a greater use of the internet will allow the higher education to address economic disparities of society.

If passed, the Secretary of Education would award one-year grants to insitutions, professors, and textbook companies to create or update textbooks in open formats. The Bill also requires any “educational materials created through federal grants to be licensed under an open license” (Congressional Research Service), including “grants distributed by … the National Science Foundation” (8.5-6). This would include anything from curricula to research to textbooks. And though Congress recognizes the “generally accepted principles of academic freedom that established the right and responsibility of faculty members … to select course materials that are pedagogically most appropriate for their classes,” (8.22-26) Congress would request institutions to encourage professors to use open textbooks in their coursework.

Cynicism over Senator Durbin’s good intentions need not be too strong, but the implications of this Bill are many. Ultimately, it creates government ownership and control of knowledge and an imposing influence over higher education with the creation of a kind of national curriculum.

\(^8\) It should be noted, Faigley does not suggest electronic discourse is not without issues, however, there is the suggestion that as digital education is more widely used, those issues will be addressed and, to an extent, resolved.
The majority of the comments were superficial observations about the essay and generalized comments about societal values as they appeared in the essay. Many of the discussion threads stalled because they could not be sustained beyond their generalities, and even at the end of the class comments did not advance beyond general observations or simply agreeing or disagreeing with what another student wrote.

While Faigley perhaps naively idealizes the online environment, others like Anya Kamenetz, author of *DIY U* (Do It Yourself University), push this idealization much further, using Paulo Freire, for example, to argue that online instruction be expanded radically, suggesting that an online education gives students more authority over what they learn. More than just allow for voice, that is, online will give the student power. In a chapter of her book titled “Independent Study,” Kamenetz describes how the internet is used to create “new learning networks” independent of the university. She details how she used YouTube, blogs, *The Washington Post* and Google Scholar to learn about Tuvan throat singing. And while the process of learning she describes is remarkably similar to what many would consider *research*, she writes: “[i]deas travel faster over informal, digitally connected networks than when they are siloed inside academic departments” (111). While Kamenetz is perhaps referring to the way knowledge is sometimes treated, as something to be owned, in the corporate university, the arguments she and Faigley posit assume that students’ voices and learning are stunted by the central authority of the teacher in a physical classroom.

Online education, however, is more about providing access to content than it is creating a context for learning. To consider that the interactions that take place in a physical classroom can be replicated online is to confuse training with education. The way we move about the space of the internet is telling of the kind of education we receive in an online
Unlike print, the way reading and gathering information is done while online does not need to follow the conventional academic model. Normal online practices like surfing, for example, transfer to an online class. Also problematic is when the digital environment assumes models from outside it re-creates them in existing images. The space of an online classroom resembles a social networking website like Facebook more closely than it does an actual classroom. The resemblance to these sites also brings many of the same limitations; the most telling may be that “discussion” happens in strings of comments rather than actual and sustained discussion that advances students’ understanding of ideas. Within the framework of an online classroom, too, the kind of maneuvering done on the internet is replicated through the ability to glimpse and glean from assigned readings, posts and responses. The flexibility in one’s schedule that online instruction allows can benefit a student who might have other obligations outside of their studies, but, as comments, responses etc. from students and the instructor can be posted at any time, it is difficult to attend to all class communications, which encourages learning through gleaning.

The model for online instruction is relatively the same from course to course. Lectures can be recorded and posted online for students to watch, real-time chats can be scheduled, and new media can be incorporated into a course, but flexibility for interaction is limited in the space of an online class, enough so that the course is really only a platform for information delivery. This is in part because course content is reduced to narrow learning objectives so that it can be delivered through learning modules. This delivery system standardizes education to some extent. The economy of an online class allows for larger class sizes, and because space is not an issue, more sections can be offered. Once course content is created, it can also be used in a number of classes with a number of students from
semester to semester. At Western Governors University programs begin the first of every month (Western Governors University “Admissions”); the University of Phoenix begins degree programs every five weeks (Frontline.)

In brick-and-mortar institutions, the quality of the experience is more varied than in largely or wholly online institutions. In the course of four years of study the student is exposed to a variety of situations in a variety of classrooms in a variety of contexts, from large lecture courses to small discussion based classes. Of course, while there are “lecture days,” in which there is a kind of positivist knowledge transfer, most classes are also discussion based and include group work, both large and small, class workshops and peer reviews all promoting immediate interpersonal interaction in a variety of situations, on a variety of levels, which require the students to articulate their thoughts both orally and with text.

Students, too, come to the classroom from differing backgrounds that have provided different experiences shaping their worldviews. The interactions with other students and instructors challenge, shape or reinforce worldview through discussion and writing and the thoughts that happen in between. The level of anonymity of an online classroom can sanitize this situation and create an homogenized space. Whatever “voice” a student has in an online setting is tempered by lack of consequence and immediacy. Certainly, thoughts and opinions posited in an online environment can elicit some kind of discussion and even be challenged online, but tucked safely behind a screen, removed, perhaps by thousands of miles, responses, reactions and statements carry little weight. Stanley Fish need not be invoked too strongly to suggest the meaning of text is created in the situation and that the situations online and in the physical classroom vary enough that one cannot possibly replicate the other.
In a “place-based” class students have greater opportunity to move away from positivist education models and toward a scholarly pursuit of education. When teaching writing in the space online, however, knowledge (information) is a tangible object. These objects are collected and meaning is created when objects of knowledge are combined with other objects of knowledge – creating a kind of stockpile. The practices of teaching and the function of writing follow this foundation. The writer’s “job,” then, is to combine the appropriate pieces of knowledge in order to “say” something about their topic. Because the delivery of knowledge is so vital in an online classroom, writing becomes a transactive exercise wherein disseminating objects of information/knowledge becomes the most important feature of writing. Because of this environment, the online classroom encourages a current-traditional model for writing and communication. But not only that: the situation of the online classroom teaches and reinforces that knowledge/reality/truth exists externally, which – again, as Berlin, Ohmann, and many others have cautioned – does not allow the student to fully come to knowledge or insight and prevents the student from participating fully in scholarship.

A Two Tiered System

In May 2011 Joeseph Aoun, president of Northeastern University, wrote an editorial for The Chronicle of Higher Education in response to comments made by Bill Gates that predicted “place-based” education will lose its importance and that in five years time the internet will be able to provide learning that “will be better than any single university” (qtd. in Aoun). Aoun refuted Gates’ comments, suggesting place-based education will continue to
be important in higher education, but made observations similar to Slaughter and Rhoades, noting that a variety of “delivery systems” will be employed by institutions and that they will become “not just one place, but many places – a main campus, a satellite branch […] an international outpost, and a virtual-learning environment” (Aoun). Aoun’s commentary echoes Zimpher and Obama and suggests that the variety of ways in which education can be offered will allow higher education to be many things to many people.

Indeed, on appearance the greater access to education provided by satellite campuses and online instruction would seem to democratize education and even allow a greater number of people entry to the middle class. Certainly, online colleges like Western Governors University, for example, can provide affordable course work to a large number of people, which is to some extent part of their mission. But the affordability of this kind of instruction comes at the cost of the education provided. Slaughter and Rhoades write that between 1980 and 2002 tuition costs at four-year public schools has risen almost 128 percent, and at four-year private schools more than 130 percent (“Markets” 492). Slaughter and Rhoades also observe loan markets for higher education work like any other markets and favor the middle and upper middle class (“Markets” 491-2). Students who are not able to assume high debt loads or who cannot afford high costs of education will have to attend institutions that lower tuition at the cost of the quality of the education they provide, either by including large online components or perhaps saving money by other equally worrisome means, like limiting tenure and full-time positions and replacing them with adjunct faculty, for example.

As the twenty-first century American university shifts toward providing a pointed and pragmatic education, one that will allow access to the middle class, those schools that remain strongly place-based and provide a traditional, scholarly education will increasingly become
accessible only to those students who can afford the high cost. In their examination of undergraduate educational markets Slaughter and Rhoades write that the economy of the twenty-first century will require white-collar service workers to repeatedly return to continuing education and distance education to “upgrade their skills” in order to “keep pace” with changing working conditions (*Academic Capitalism* 285). Education for these students will be more about training for a career – and then, apparently, retraining for another – than it will be about education for either real social mobility or intellectual growth.

If trends in higher education continue, then, the result could well be greater disparity in an already existing two-tier system; the greatest opportunities would go to those privileged enough to afford them, and a second level of education, one that is pragmatic and based in positivist pedagogies like those long since discredited in Composition, would go to students who cannot or who are coming from backgrounds requiring more flexibility in their school schedules. These students would receive a functional education with a functioning level of literacy, the kind of training for the professional class Ohmann observed nearly thirty-five years ago. These students, however, will be limited in their advancement within the middle class and will find it more difficult to bridge the gap between themselves and students who could afford an education that provided greater opportunity for social mobility. Aoun in his commentary, however, seems to welcome the variety of educational options made available by diversifying the delivery of education in that it can enhance students’ educational experiences. He boasts that his institution is able to add a “global dimension” to these experiences by partnering with “brokerage firms in Hong Kong, global software companies in India, and microfinance organizations in South Africa, among others” (Aoun).

Northeastern University, we should note, also has a total annual cost of $51,362
(Northeastern University “Tuition and Fees”). A likely and unfortunate vision for the future of higher education is that those who can afford it are educated, and those who cannot are trained and retrained.
Works Cited


