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Agency in the Age of Peer Production is about writing program administrators who want to better understand how and why their own writing instructors utilize peer-production technology designed for cultivating, exchanging, and evaluating writing program materials. Quentin D. Vieregge, Kyle D. Stedman, Taylor Joy Mitchell, and Joseph M. Moxley are the curious administrators, and authors, of this uniquely written tale of assessment, tech, and agency. The authors explore fellow instructor voices who decry the social networking tools, pedagogical resource wikis, and compositional rubric programs the authors established. In the midst of budget cuts and university credibility, the authors conducted interviews and scanned data hoping to assuage their writing program’s atmosphere. Ultimately, their writing program moves from what scholar Gerald Graff calls courseocentrism (14)—isolated classroom instruction—to Moxley’s own datagogy (168)—a decentralized system reflecting the ecology of the network.

Like any ethnographic study, Agency follows a traditional path of problems, questions, hypotheses, methods, data analyses, and conclusions. The authors’ core hypothesis: “If peer production is to assume its own ‘age,’ then it must be more about values than about tools, which are replaceable and easily outdated” (2). The peer-production tools are smaller programs accessed through Microsoft SharePoint, a writing portal application. These programs include Facebook-like social networking tools, various Wikis used to (re)define programmatic objectives, and an online rubric application which provides student feedback and tracks data. The values the authors discuss were found in the individual interviews and ongoing assessment of their study. For them, formal and informal face-to-face interactions complement peer-production technology, and foster communal and individual agency.

Comparatively, Agency’s information and style is unlike the more theoretical techno-utopias such as Henry Jenkins, et al.’s Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. While rich in narratives, Jenkins, et al.’s white paper is sometimes overly optimistic on what can be, instead of what is. Agency has its head in the digital cloud of technology’s pedagogical potential and its feet grounded by instructors’ tales of tripping over and thriving with technology. This is reinforced through the “datalogical narrative” style of Agency’s six chapters. The style, rooted in relevant scholarship, builds upon qualitative practices to lift up instructor voices and express a “humanistic and inspirational, not positivistic or statistical” narrative about a writing program in peril and the leadership
decisions enacted in order to transcend truncations caused by budget cuts and ubiquitous technology (35).

This unique narrative structure allows Agency’s six chapters to be seen as both a professionally designed qualitative research report with step-by-step detail, and a warm, collaboratively written tale imbued with humility, humor, and honesty. As a qualitative report, the authors present components in traditional order. Chapters 1 and 2 frame Agency’s problem, purpose, methodologies, questions, and hypotheses. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 represent the “personalized interpretation” of the data collected from their own department (35). Chapter 6 wraps up the qualitative study with conclusions and unanswered questions. The authors share their desire to “perhaps provide a [research and programmatic] road map for other university writing programs to follow” (142), yet later acknowledge potential institutional differences (148-155).

Agency’s narrative thread illustrates the trials and triumphs of a writing program community. Just as the research structure provides academic credibility, the narrative arc appeals emotionally to writing program stakeholders—lead administrators, programmatic mentors, and instructors of all experience levels—who wish to use peer-production technology. Vieregge, Stedman, Mitchell, and Moxley could have waltzed into any institution, but chose their own—anonymously naming it Research University (RU)—where they held four influential administrative positions. As the authors contend, “we engage[d] with our research participants by unashamedly interacting with them to better our program and investigate the various interactions between individual and collective power” (34-35). Each chapter is filled with this emotional energy and sincerity to learn.

Chapter 1, “Peer Production and Tectonic Shifts in Agency” establishes scholarly perspectives on peer-production technology in FYC programs. The authors draw on Jenkins, Benkler, Nissenbaum, Boyd, Ellison, Brown, and others to establish how peer-production “communities have reshuffled power relations, enabling individuals to influence the shape and direction of modern life, world markets, elections, and public opinion” by allowing “users to add content, which affects the way knowledge is constructed” (9). The authors recognize that this empowerment is not always felt by FYC instructors. From their own instructors, they were anecdotally aware of three empowerment obstacles: courseocentrism, insufficient training, and the “80-20 rule” (15)—20% of users actively engage in peer-production technology while 80% engage occasionally and casually.

These obstacles, coupled with RU’s FYC identity, provide the catalyst described by the authors in chapter 2, “Contexts and Research Questions.” The authors make clear RU’s context: “The majority of our 500+ sections of first-year composition courses are . . . classrooms that have a networked computer, a computer projection system, a document camera, and a DVD player” (23). In order to connect overburdened instructors with technorich classrooms, the writing program administrators created a face-to-face
mentorship program. One of the main goals was to familiarize instructors on SharePoint and its related peer-production tools. However, instructors saw the face-to-face and the digital as two separate spaces thereby causing Agency’s authors to revisit five years of archival data and conduct two years of interviews. Their overarching research question: from an instructor standpoint, what kinds of relationships exist between peer-production technology, face-to-face mentoring, agency, and assessment data?

These individual instructors’ experiences are conveyed prominently in chapters 3, 4, and 5, demonstrating a reality familiar to English Departments. Chapter 3, “Creating a Culture of Assessment” shares reactions from the mandatory implementation of the online writing rubric, My Reviewer. The inclusion of an instructor-created newsletter which recasts RU’s writing program administrators as “Big Brother” shows how the authors are open to all types of feedback in order to engage the anxiety felt toward assessment (46-49). This thick skin granted them insight into 26 diverse instructor perspectives. The honest responses frame common problems instructors face using online rubrics: the panoptic feel of data tracking, a frustration with inscribing grades then entering data, and the lack of intuitiveness from the software.

The voices in chapter 4: “Managing a Self-Sustaining Network” represent the more optimistic views of assessment and peer-production technology. Refreshingly unexpected, however, is the authors’ choice to follow those voices with dissenting ones in chapter 5, “Agency in the Mentoring Program.” Structurally, these chapters are similar. Both dedicate whole sections to select instructors who self-identify as “innovators” or “laggards” from Everett M. Rogers model of technological adaptation (86). As the chapter titles indicate, the authors showcase their specific peer-production technology practices and face-to-face mentorship program interactions, respectively.

Chapter 4 focuses on three sub-groups the authors discovered when analyzing interviews. Playfully named after Soap Opera titles, each subgroup characterizes different instructor approaches and attitudes toward the peer-production technology. Individuals like Claudette, from The Young and Restless, searches and reads other peers’ projects to help construct her own (93-94). Shirley, from the Guiding Light, expresses feeling initially overwhelmed then suggests to the writing program administrators changes in personal training to complement technological intuitiveness (105-109). The narratives in each sub-group alter how we see the digital divide, and create a continuum of technological engagement instead of a polarization.

Reemphasizing the authors’ commitment toward all kinds of feedback, chapter 5 opens with an instructor stating that “you can’t give someone agency” (116). This chapter specifies how the face-to-face mentorship program attempts to address concerns similar to Shirley’s. Here, the values seen by the authors start to gravitate together: provide open feedback space, continuously share ideas, promote social interaction, and practice humble leadership. This is where both research and narrative threads converge as
if happening in real-time: the authors acknowledge dissenting voices, learn from them, and adapt their writing program accordingly, without reinventing the wheel.

In chapter 6, “Agency, Peer Production, and University Composition Programs,” these values are further discussed in the research’s results, questions to consider, and implications for programs wishing to use peer-production technology. The authors here earn our applause for overcoming budgetary concerns because they’ve remained transparent and grounded throughout the whole book, not because they seek it. Their research clarifies how and why instructors maintain a sense of individual agency with communal agency, and the authors’ more global implications reflect a humble and active view of writing program leadership.

Vieregge, Stedman, Mitchell, and Moxley are a team of individuals unafraid to use research to show how human agency thrives in a technological world. They are unafraid to place professional writing alongside playful language. They are unafraid to assess their own decisions as administrators. From my perspective, which has seen the inner-workings of Student Affairs and Academic departments alike, this fearlessness represents true educational leadership in an actual learning organization. I look forward to, and hope for, their potential follow up which further discusses the student data they were collecting at the time of writing. Agency is a self-reflective collection of researched stories from teachers about a community who changed their writing program through collaborative online/offline spaces/practices thereby resolving budgetary and political concerns while maintaining a focus on what matters: our students.

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Works Cited