

Understanding the Impacts of Participatory, Digital Technologies on Classroom Practices

Participatory Composition: Video Culture, Writing, and Electracy, by Sarah J. Arroyo. Carbondale: SIUP, 2013. 169 pp.

Teaching Literature and Language Online, edited by Ian Lancashire. New York: MLA, 2009. 440 pp.

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Participatory Composition, by Sarah J. Arroyo, and *Teaching Literature and Language Online*, edited by Ian Lancashire, take up a central question for college humanities faculty: how do we incorporate emerging forms of technology in language, writing, and literature courses? In response, Arroyo's book explores the collaborative culture developing around YouTube videos. Informed by Gregory Ulmer's writing on "electracy," Arroyo creates a framework for understanding the participatory dynamics around video sharing and social media; she also examines the implications of this participatory rhetoric for the teaching of writing. Lancashire's *Teaching Literature and Language Online* does not focus on video but rather casts a wider net as the contributors explore how information technologies are reshaping pedagogy and learning in writing, language, and literature courses. In his introduction, Lancashire argues that "there are three key perspectives on online teaching: the institution's, the teacher's, and the student's" (1). The organization of *Teaching Literature and Language Online*, however, does not directly mirror these three perspectives. Instead, it is divided into three parts that examine (1) the range of approaches to online education across different MLA disciplines, (2) case studies of online language courses, and (3) case studies of online literature courses. Many of the chapters take into account institutional issues, faculty perspectives, and, to a lesser degree, student views. At first, the objectives and organizational structures of these two books may appear disparate from each other, but there is a synergy that emerges as they are read together.

Both works try to formulate pedagogical responses to the increasingly participatory digital technologies that are reshaping the ways public and educational discourses operate. Arroyo's work explores the implications of YouTube and video sharing for composition studies; Lancashire's wide-ranging, multi-authored collection about teaching languages, writing, and literature online addresses an evolution within not only humanities research but also within humanities teaching. It should be noted that Lancashire's book is the older of the two. It was published in 2009, while *Participatory Composition* just came

out in 2013. In addition, many of the chapters in *Teaching Literature and Language Online* discuss online courses or course materials used during the mid 2000s. The datedness of the pieces in *Teaching Literature and Language Online* somewhat limits our ability to draw immediate, practical lessons from them for our own classrooms in 2014. Also, the disjuncture between the work's 2009 publication date and the time when the online courses and materials were developed speaks to the problem of timeliness in terms of humanities scholarship, especially humanities scholarship about teaching—it's too slow. Jerome McGann takes this problem as his starting point in "Humane Studies in Digital Space," one of six essays in part one of *Teaching Literature and Language Online*. McGann argues that to counter this problem of the slow availability of humanities publications "educators and scholars need professionally sanctioned online-publishing mechanisms" (90). It is an interesting claim about the need for officially recognized research and teaching materials, one that runs in a different direction from much of what Arroyo develops in *Participatory Composition*. That is, while McGann is focused on scholars' production of critical materials and their dissemination to students, Arroyo is interested in students' production of their own digital compositions. Arroyo's book is about a rhetorical education where the students themselves are participating in and creating online cultural spaces.

Still, reading *Participatory Composition* and *Teaching Literature and Language Online* together encouraged me to think beyond the divide between writing studies and literary studies. These texts also encouraged me to think about the ways in which college faculty who teach courses on languages, writing, or literature wrestle with similar issues as we reshape our teaching in face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses and take advantage of digital technologies in order to increase opportunities for student participation. Humanities faculty who work in languages, writing, and literature are adapting pedagogies to work with the multimodal forms of discourse that students are increasingly encountering within their academic, social, and professional lives. Working to develop those pedagogies is challenging, but Arroyo's and Lancashire's books make the task easier by theorizing and providing specific classroom examples that showcase how methods of teaching languages, writing, and literature shift in promising directions in our digital age.

Arroyo's *Participatory Composition* engages with Gregory Ulmer's concept of "electracy" and the work of "Florida School" writers such as Jeff Rice, Craig Saper, Michael Jarrett, Barry Mauer, and Marcel O'Gorman (see Rice and O'Gorman). While Arroyo's introduction is careful to situate her project in relation to previous work on "electracy," as a whole the book extends well beyond advocating for an updated approach to the personalized, digital nar-

ratives that Ulmer advocated having students write as “MyStories.” Chapter two, “Recasting Subjectivity for Electracy,” documents the collaborative culture developing around YouTube videos. Arroyo engages and challenges critiques of YouTube use within higher education put forward by Henry Jenkins and Alexandra Juhasz. Particularly interesting is Arroyo’s response to Juhasz’s view of YouTube as being fundamentally organized around popularity and driven by the frivolous (42-45). Arroyo contends that “while popularity is certainly an organizing structure on YouTube, it doesn’t serve as the only catalyst that brings people to the site” (43). For Arroyo, YouTube videos can be innovative within higher education classes because the medium does not replicate the forms of discourse or writing used in textual or live, face-to-face interactions. In addition to the medium of video shifting rhetorical delivery and reception, YouTube is a social media platform. Its logic and practices do not break neatly into professional/amateur or commercial/community dichotomies. Instead, Arroyo argues, YouTube is an emerging set of creative, rhetorical, and social practices that facilitate a continuum of cultural productions and participatory actions. Higher education classes—particularly those focused on rhetoric and composition—should engage students directly not only in thinking about YouTube as a participatory space but also in having students participate in the rhetorical contexts opened up by online video sharing and social media platforms.

It is at this moment in her book that Arroyo begins to go beyond Ulmer and other “Florida School” writers’ previous work. Chapter three, “The Question of Definition,” returns to the ancient rhetorical concepts of *stasis* and *chora*. Arroyo blends Ulmer’s take on *chora* with Victor Vitanza’s work on countertheses and Collin Brooke’s concept of *proairesis*. Citing Vitanza’s *Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric*, Arroyo considers the implications of rhetorical and social systems creating boundaries between the included and the excluded. She takes Vitanza’s insight that “Wherever there is a system (totality, unity), there is the trace of the excluded” (4) and argues that it is “one of the most provocative yet pressing notions for our discussion: asking what something is, in order to define and set up boundaries, undoubtedly excludes and purges that which it is not” (Arroyo 51). By tracing the historical significance within rhetoric and composition studies of *stasis* theory as a method of limiting the scope of an argument and as a means of developing *topoi* appropriate to that argument (49-54), Arroyo sets up a response that recuperates *chora*, the movement or flow of an argument, rather than focusing on how to limit an argument as a vital step in the invention and composition process. Brooke’s concept of *proairesis*, as well as the participatory practices of “tubing” and sharing that exist in the rhetorical space of YouTube, informs Arroyo’s work at this point. I cannot hope to do justice to Arroyo’s subtle argument in my limited space here, but

her valuing of *chora* as part of rhetorical invention is beautifully illustrated—unsurprisingly—in “The Dancing Floor,” a work available as both a YouTube video (Alaei and Arroyo) and as a scholarly article in *Kairos* (Arroyo and Alaei).

While Jenkins, Juhasz, and others have dismissed YouTube based on a logic of frivolous popularity, and while rhetorical theory has valued *stasis* and *topoi* as means of facilitating invention for student writers, Arroyo offers us an alternative—choric processes for invention that value the sharing and participatory cultural practices students may already be familiar with from sites such as YouTube. What is significant about her work is that it not only extends Ulmer’s “electracy” to account for YouTube and other Web 2.0 technologies but that Arroyo also links cultural theory to implications for pedagogical practices. Her penultimate chapter, “Participatory Pedagogy: Merging Postprocess and Postpedagogy,” is essential reading for composition studies scholars. Arroyo traces the interplay among theory and practice in digital spaces where shifts in writing technologies never slow down enough to allow mastery in the old sense of the term. She argues for a composition praxis that embraces online videos and collaboration, but it is not those forms or media alone that Arroyo urges us to value. Instead, it is the participatory, the action of teaching and learning as dialogue among students and teachers, among participants, that she would have us value.

Aligning Thomas Kent’s work on postprocess theory and Vitanza’s advocacy for postpedagogy, Arroyo reminds us that her project is not primarily about sharing online videos, rather it is about developing participatory practices in higher education courses focused on writing and rhetoric. She urges writing teachers to blend rhetorical theories and pedagogical practices “[b]y both working with established forms as well as inventing new ones as they become timely and necessary. This act requires letting go of the idea that when we teach writing in all of its manifestations, we are transmitting a body of knowledge based on a solid theoretical foundation” (111). *Participatory Composition* is a challenge to business as usual in college writing and rhetoric courses. That challenge may at first seem to be about YouTube—videos as possible compositions in writing courses—but if read carefully, Arroyo’s book reaches well beyond debates about how many multimodal assignments to include in a first-year composition course. *Participatory Composition* asks us to think not about *how* we value the writing students create and that we grade, but rather about *what* we want to value in the process of learning.

In reaching out to these larger questions regarding what to value when learning about languages, writing, and literature, Lancashire’s collection does not begin with a focus on online videos. Instead he creates a wider arena in which he outlines how emerging forms of information technology impact the con-

tributors' pedagogy and learning in writing, language, and literature courses. With its focus on online learning in the humanities, *Teaching Literature and Language Online* brings together essays from what would feel like disparate research communities in other circumstances. Where else would an overview section include essays from a noted scholar of Spanish and linguistics (Robert Blake), an exemplary composition studies researcher (Kris Blair), and a renowned literary critic whose publications include critical digital editions of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's works (Jerome McGann)? *Teaching Literature and Language Online* encourages us to think about the ways in which available multimodal writing technologies are reshaping college classes. Like Arroyo, each of the contributors is concerned with how students are deeply immersed in working with texts and languages to foster understanding of their own—and others'—languages and cultures.

The exact challenges of reshaping college humanities courses to incorporate more digital technologies and to foster greater student participation vary across disciplines and languages. For instance, the challenges and already available source materials are markedly different for Murray McGillivray's work with students on Old English literary texts and Gillian Lord's efforts to use online tools to bring Aymara—a living indigenous language with approximately three million speakers in Bolivia, Peru, and Chile—to a wider audience “for educational purposes as well as to ensure the preservation of this stimulating language” (178). Lancashire's *Teaching Literature and Language Online* presents these different challenges by first outlining approaches to online courses from different disciplines represented in the Modern Language Association (MLA). The second section of the book presents case studies, such as Lord's discussion of developing online tools for teaching Aymara, focused on language learning. Part three digs into courses focused on helping students understand literary texts, such as the Shakespeare courses where Michael Best uses print, electronic, and multimedia technologies “to provide much more detail about the processes of teaching than [his] classroom courses usually do” (257), and James Fitzmaurice's use of WebCT discussion board posts to foster student writing that was more thoughtful and drew on more textual evidence than that produced “by reading content modules, or lectures” (269). Of course, some of the works in the last section, such as the already referenced chapter by McGillivray on developing an online course on Old English, include discussions of language learning as well as analysis of literary texts. Taken together the three parts of *Teaching Literature and Language Online* speak to the challenge of using digital technologies to foster student engagement with language learning and literary analysis activities.

On one level, these essays are less explicitly engaged with developing participatory classroom practices than Arroyo's work is. However, on another

level, most of the essays in *Teaching Literature and Language Online* address how student engagement and participation become increasingly apparent—and vital for a course’s success—when courses move into online venues. Kris Blair’s “Writing as Process and Online Education” and Mary Ann Lyman-Hager’s “Teaching World Languages Online” take up the issues of increasing student engagement and participation explicitly. Exploring their essays in slightly more depth offers us a chance to foray into the considerations around increasing student participation that play out in many of the contributions to *Teaching Literature and Language Online*.

Blair’s piece is situated in relationship with Cindy Selfe’s work on the importance of paying attention to writing technologies, Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda Gamson’s “Seven Principles” for effective undergraduate education, and Lee Shulman’s concept of “signature pedagogies” as important workshop learning styles in disciplines ranging from law to medicine to composition. Blair argues that “community formation involves more than the mere use of a discussion board or chat room; it requires significant planning and communication of learning outcomes to the students, as well as the documentation of faculty expectations of students to meet those outcomes” (42). At first, Blair’s vision of a dynamic online writing course that centers on clearly communicating course outcomes may appear less robust, less rhizomatic, less student-centered than Arroyo’s YouTube-based participatory composition; however, Blair is in many ways creating a space for the type of (re)thinking about learning in the digital age that Arroyo develops. Blair acknowledges that faculty are more likely to be digital immigrants than students. She suggests that both faculty and students need to be open to incorporating rapidly changing tools for writing in digital spaces. Her vision is one where administrators support faculty and students by providing time and managing workload expectations so that online writing courses can incorporate “the podcast, the blog, the wiki, or numerous other open-source tools” (47). Blair’s chapter—like many of the chapters in *Teaching Literature and Language Online*—is both a call for help and a challenge to mid- and upper-level university administrators. It is possible to build online environments that foster participatory educational practices in writing, language, and literature courses, but, Blair reminds us, the potential success of these environments is limited by constraints that may be outside of the control of classroom teachers or even writing program administrators. Despite those limitations, the possibilities of using online tools to make courses more engaging and more memorable for students drives Blair and the other contributors of *Teaching Literature and Language Online* to articulate a vision of pedagogies and learning environments that may be as interactive and participatory as the ones advocated by Arroyo in *Participatory Composition*.

When approaching the concept of student participation in class, it would be typical for a composition studies expert to frame the debate as an opposition between approaches to teaching writing and approaches to teaching literature. That move would be a very English department centered way of considering pedagogical approaches. One of the valuable aspects of *Teaching Literature and Language Online* is its inclusion of diverse disciplines within the MLA. That is, this volume is not dedicated to the teaching of English (writing and literature) online, but to teaching the humanities online more broadly. If we wanted to sketch out the most recent and exciting work in participatory pedagogy, we could do worse than draw a Venn diagram that showed the overlap of language, literature, and writing pedagogies. Discussions of online education and digital humanities teaching may be a vehicle for bringing together faculty concerned about student learning and how the environments in which we work foster that learning through student participation.

The focus of Lyman-Hager's essay—as well as the pieces by Robert Blake, Dawn Formo and Kimberly Robinson Neary, Nike Arnold, Gillian Lord, and Douglas Morgenstern—suggests that participation in digital learning spaces is vital to conversations about pedagogies and student participation in courses. Lyman-Hager argues that “the task before language educators is to determine not whether online education (e-learning) functions less well, as well, or better than face-to-face learning but how to create face-to-face educational settings, blended online environments, and distance courses that . . . make participation in language communities memorable for students and relevant to their needs” (70). Her essay goes on to trace the development of pedagogical theories for language learning and teaching and to suggest the importance of moving beyond communicative competence. Drawing on the work of Renate A. Schulz and Claire Kramsch, Lyman-Hager uses theories of language learning to show that a language community's engagement with the full-range of semiotic practices creates a much richer learning experience than does an emphasis on comprehensive language (70-73). That is, motivation, interaction, and meaning are key elements to learning and using a language. Lyman-Hager's chapter draws parallels between the changes in (foreign) language pedagogies and developments in composition pedagogies in the last twenty-five years. For me, reading Lyman-Hager's essay suggests the need for richer dialogues among writing teachers and foreign language instructors. These conversations about writing—in and beyond writing in English—have already begun in pushes towards translingual approaches to composition studies (see Horner et al.) and in efforts to map how writing programs are administered around the globe (see Thaiss et al). We may be at a point in composition studies—really in the humanities more generally—where student participation becomes a key term for designing pedagogical approaches and learning environments.

Both *Participatory Composition* and *Teaching Literature and Language Online* remind us that forms of language, writing, and literature are shifting, and that college humanities classes are increasingly incorporating digital elements. Arroyo's and Lancashire's books are important tools for rethinking how students and faculty learn together in our digital age. Participatory culture for Arroyo emerges from blending the rhetorical theories of Ulmer and Vitanza with the culture of "tubing"—the sharing culture of YouTube. In a similar manner, Lancashire's collection brings together disparate sources: researchers and teachers working in English, foreign languages, and composition studies. The commonalities among the essays in Lancashire's collection—their wrestling with how to increase student interaction and learning in online courses—are amplified when we consider them in relationship with Arroyo's call for developing a participatory culture within postsecondary educational environments. At first this call for increased participation may seem primarily focused on engaging students by having them write in formats that are multimodal (e.g., YouTube) and having them share those works in ways that are informed by preexisting social media models. And that is part of it. But a review of Arroyo's and Lancashire's books together drives me toward a larger conclusion, a larger challenge: how do we foster participatory environments where students may learn about writing across multiple modes, languages, and disciplines?

Composition studies has important perspectives to contribute to these conversations. The terrific work coming out of computers and composition—and I would include Arroyo's book in this category—needs to be read and considered by faculty teaching language and literature courses as well as by writing researchers. At the same time, Lancashire's book reminds me that those of us who have found our home in composition studies may need to look beyond the borders of our disciplinary home to consider how the affordances of digital texts open up multilingual and multidisciplinary spaces for student learning. Composition studies and our allied, or sub-, fields of professional writing, rhetoric, technical communication, and WAC/WID have been leaders in considering how digital texts offer more opportunities for multimodal forms of writing and teaching. If we move forward with more explicit discussions of writing as multilingual and multidisciplinary, we may find benefits not only for our students but also for ourselves.

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