

Writing On the Cloud: Five Tweets Towards A Massive Composition Pedagogy

Before I begin:

This is a brief introduction to a field of pedagogy I know many of us have given much thought. I am here not to educate, but rather to collaborate. I invite you all to join in the discussion by Tweeting your thoughts to the screen behind me (include both [#4C14](#) and [#MassComp](#)). The topics you suggest will guide my research following this conference. I will publish a response to these comments on the digital journal [Hybrid Pedagogy](#) in the weeks follow the conference, allowing for a more in depth consideration of the pedagogy I hint at today. I challenge you all to imagine with me a radically different form of learning composition.

1. Composition is a Hybrid Skill.

Composition is an art class. It's also a philosophy course, a political forum, and a social science, even when the teacher strives for objectivity¹. There is no quick solution, no formula. The key to learning composition anywhere (online or off) is in practice, feedback, and revision. Yet, this recursive cycle cannot be maintained with [a few thousands active students](#) online. So what does massive composition pedagogy look like? In a word: it's [hybrid](#). *Hybrid*, as in genetics, refers to "the offspring of genetically dissimilar parents or stock." In engineering, *hybrid* refers to a vehicle "powered by more than one source," and in linguistics, *hybrid* means a word where "part of [it is] derived from one language and part from another."

Massive composition pedagogy should take all of these ideas into account. A text isn't born of a single genius, but the combination of many minds. Years of Westernized interbreeding has left us with a sterile form. I dream of a hybrid composition born of culturally dissimilar

¹ Students navigate using their voice while maintaining the rigor of the academic environment. [Peer-review complicates](#) this delicate balance even further. Students catch the obvious errors, though authentic insight and substantive edits are few and far between.

parents. I imagine a massive composition that is peer-powered and communal. To attach a single name to any text is misleading. Hundreds of voices have informed your thoughts; an entire history of ideas seep through these words. Language informs epistemology, and so let us consider a massive composition pedagogy that challenges the limitations of any one linguistic history.

How can we envision a pedagogy more conducive to composition's hybrid nature? The challenge of massive composition is indeed massive. Merging my words with your words is but the beginning. What learning model can reach the asynchronous, global network? This as an experiment in [cultural exchange](#) and [massive collaboration](#).

2. Classroom Pedagogy Does Not Scale to the Massive

It may be tempting for an educator transitioning into a digital space to attempt to modify their classroom practices for online learning. [Do not do this](#). I have witnessed the [shortcomings of this method](#). Many of the digital classrooms that followed this model did not account for the cultural shifts that emerge from this new learning environment. The classroom is a culture and it relies on intimate relationships to set the participation norms. [Digitally, relationships are different](#). Nobody holds you accountable. Nobody misses you when you're gone.

Massive composition will benefit from “engaging, challenging, [and] participatory” learning environments ([Veletsianos 3](#)). The pedagogy should strive to [maximize these elements](#) specifically for the digital environment. Many of the current designs are ineffective. The [video-lecture and content-quiz structure](#) leaves students isolated from his or her peers, lacking engagement. The level of participation is left up to the individual student, though the difficulty of navigating the discussion boards often leaves the student frustrated and discouraged. The future

of digital learning will not be built with the artifacts of an analogue past. But we need not start from scratch, either. The Internet, like the classroom, has a rich cultural history.

3. Massive Composition Pedagogy (Might) Look(s) like Wikipedia?

Despite the [recent spike in publications](#) around [MOOCs](#), [digital learning communities are not new](#). Wikipedia, for example, launched in 2001 and has been gaining momentum as an alternative model of learning ever since. Many scholars ([Juha Souranta](#)², [Tere Vaden](#), [Jennifer Jenson](#), and [Suzanne de Castell](#)) have outlined how a site such as Wikipedia is not only an active learning community, but could also serve as a model for education and inform our thoughts regarding [critical pedagogy](#). Wikipedia breaks the expectations of the encyclopedia form by allowing anyone to participate in the production of knowledge. It's voluntary, peer-sourced, and radically open. Its very existence creates a tension among gatekeepers as it disrupts the traditional flow of information. Learning Management Systems (LMS) evolved to fit the needs of brick-and-mortar classrooms. Wikipedia, however, was born digital. Metaphorically, this is the difference between a PDF and a Google Doc.

We can learn a lot from these stark contrasts. There are no classrooms online, so let's stop pretending. There's no units or "modules" because there are no boundaries to contain them. And there is no rigid, predetermined direction, because the Internet is, as we all know, a web. This is scary stuff. It contradicts much of what we know education to be. Yet, there's extraordinary power in this alternative learning culture. How can we harness the power of disruptive communication? How do we channel the noise of the crowd, and mobilize the masses?³ These

² Souranta describes "Wikilearning," which is: radical open, disorganized, voluntary, radically inclusive peer-to-peer, reflectively uncertain, cooperative, collective intelligence, knowledge as aggregate, problem-based learning, local, contextual ad hoc-learning, and radically equal.

³ For example, [my letter of recommendation](#) is an open, public document. Go ahead: add something!

questions will not be answered in personal learning modules or through instructor-led assignments. Like Wikipedia, the pedagogy of massive composition is emergent, uncertain, transformative, and most importantly, [always only half written](#).

4. Peer-“Assessment” is a myth / Assessment = power relations

[Peer-assessment](#) intends to [crowd-source the assessment process](#). While the quality of this process varies, MOOCs follow a general peer-assessment format: they’re double-blind, guided by the instructor’s rubric, and largely quantitative. The assessment this model is trying to replicate, however, is an artifact of the classroom. It isn’t effective because it isn’t intended for massive communities. In the classroom, assessment is done by the instructor, so the power relation inherent in the assessment process mirrors the general [power dichotomy](#) of the teacher/student relationship.

When we ask students to assess one another, however, there is a shift in the students’ power. The individuals are no longer peers, but two sides of a mock teacher/student dichotomy, which proves problematic⁴. The rhetoric of [“peer-assessment” reinforces the wrong elements](#) of the peer-knowledge exchange. Don’t assess; assist. Peers that [edit together](#) become mutually invested in the article’s success. Imagine a [pedagogy of peer-collaboration](#), an open and creative

⁴ First, the student has in no way earned that power, as instructors have, through several years of rigorous study and practice in their field. Given this disconnect, students are apt to disbelieve one another’s remarks--this appears readily in the forums where students attempt to seek out their anonymous adversaries with cruel, ad hominem attacks. Students demand the justification they were so terribly shortchanged on in their assessment itself. Second, the role of “peer”-assessor relies on several assumptions: (1) that they understand what the meta-assessor (the teacher’s built rubric) is looking for in the student work; (2) that they are able to discern the quality of those attributes fairly; and (3) that they will model a certain culture of assessment identical to the rest of the class. There isn’t a framework to support this in many MOOCs. Third, and most significantly, the installation of this temporary power dynamic alienates the students from an even more powerful and generative system, which is a community of peers. Assessors rely on power and position to demarcate good from bad. While this process ought to be completed critically and through sound justification, the very privilege associated with the term may obscure the process in favor of the results.

space where peers work together to design the best paper possible. Don't ask for numbers, or grades; ask, instead, for critical inquiry, discussion, and revision. Let writing cease to be an individual act of genius, and watch it become the collaborative, hybrid project it has always been⁵.

5. Wiki:Feminism - A Case Study in Massive Revision

On [November 2001](#), an editor known as "[200.191.188.xxx](#)" set forth on a project to define Feminism on a then new encyclopedia platform, *Wikipedia*. Since then, this stub of an article has inspired [8,847 revisions from over three-thousand authors](#). 70% of these edits are considered substantial. The average time between edits is twelve hours, and as of February 12, 807 individuals receive an email every time an edit has been made. [Wiki:Feminism](#) is read over 100,000 times a month. The article Wiki:Feminism is, in fact, more active than many MOOCs. Writing a paper is not a project to be completed, turned in, or published, it the birthing of a new idea. Learning--that deep, visceral, recursive learning--occurs once communities emerge around a subject and care for that newborn idea. A handful of double-blind peers that "assess" a text once or twice isn't a learning community. The most beautiful moment of an article's life, I feel, is the moment when the original author's work is so deeply embedded into the framework of the dialogue that the originator's words no longer exist in the article itself. It's a transcendental moment. Today, [only seventeen of the original words](#) written in Wiki:Feminism, November 2001 survive. Squished together, and arranged as a poem, the original article reads:

“of and of
to a women

⁵ In a radically open, emergent learning environment, "assessment" is how well the words stand the test of time. Texts are alive and they breathe through their revisions. Traditional assessment pokes at the text, afraid of what will happen if you get too close. Radically open assessment dances with the text and lives within its sentences. This is digital intimacy.

to the and some
to equal pay
for have but
feminists.”

Now *that*, I say, is a culture of learning, a community of revision. The life of this or any text mirrors that of other living creatures: there's cycles of consumption and production, there's evolution. New trees rise from the seeds of the old.

Thank you.

APPENDIX

Tools Towards a Massive, Composition Pedagogy

<http://calliopeinitiative.org>

<https://drive.google.com>

<https://hackpad.com>

<https://www.penflip.com>

<https://www.wikipedia.org>

