

## **Expectations of Transformation: Research Blogging and the Quest for Inspired Writing Instruction**

[introduction to an imaginary study on “new media” and hi-tech education – July, 2007]

In the spring of 2007 I taught three sections of a first-year writing course at a large, private university in Queens, New York. I can honestly say that this course changed my life. I make this claim in full view of the founding assumptions of modern schooling: that education, for teachers and students alike, can change minds and lives; that the pursuit of learning is often compared to an intellectual journey, or quest, in search of new understandings, ideas, and knowledge; in short, that education is transformative, or at least potentially so. This study, in fact, focuses on one such transformative moment in the interest of understanding—differently if not better—the expectations and assumptions that inform educational interactions (in this case, the teaching and learning of college writing) when the educational objectives themselves are linked, in deliberate and overt ways, to a governing logic, or “dogma,” of transformation (Newkirk ##).

My specific purpose is to analyze teacher and student expectations in relation to larger assumptions (also hopes, dreams, fears) about new media techniques and technologies in today’s wired world. The course under review here—first-year English Composition—transpired on a campus committed to “high-tech education” for all incoming and transfer students. Central to the university’s “high-tech approach to education,” as stated on the institutional website, is a recently implemented Laptop Program whose main objective is “to give students equal access to technology and to provide faculty with a mobile computer option” (website). The institution’s commitment to wireless connectivity and computer access comes with a corollary promise of educational and professional success: “The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the Age of Technology, and [our university] prepares students for leadership in this brave new world” (website).

This ominous language speaks to particular institutional expectations and assumptions about new media technology and the “brave new world” of high-tech education. My aim here, though, is to focus on student and teacher perceptions and practices in a setting defined, in part, by these and other celebratory pronouncements on behalf of “cutting edge technology” and universal “connectivity.” In everyday practice, how did my students use their new media machines, for academic work in particular? Given the university’s stated “high-tech approach” to education, how did those enrolled in my first-year writing class approach their own learning once equipped with both laptops and campus-wide wireless connections? Also, returning to my original theme, if education inspires, for some at least, a kind of personal transformation useful not only to later “leadership” activities but to human life in general (a classic progressivist ideal, no doubt, and one discussed further below), then how did my students change or not (assuming this can be measured at all) during a semester designed to encourage the practice of intellectual growth, development, and transformation? Finally, how did computers, new media composition techniques, and institutional mandates contribute to this overall *expectation* of transformation?

My aim as an educator was to address these questions via specific interventions in the teaching of college writing. One such intervention took the form of a home-made textbook, entitled *Vision Quest Guidebook*. As the title suggests, the *Vision Quest Guidebook* (VQ Guide) embraced, in full force, the learning-as-journey metaphor; in fact, I made it clear in the introductory section of the book (and verbally on the first day of class) that this writing course would structure student work “as the continuation of a ‘quest’ that began before our first meeting and which you [the student/s] will carry on long after this class is over” (*Vision Quest* 9). My intention from the beginning was to shape the guidebook as a theoretical and practical communiqué written directly to the students, with the hope that it would serve, as most guidebooks ostensibly do, as an aid to navigating my course. I wrote, assembled, and designed the guidebook (using my own university-issued laptop) in the weeks prior to the start of the spring semester and then self-published it, using an Internet-based print-on-demand service, in time for the first week of class. To recoup my expenses (about \$400 total), I sold the books to the students at a cost determined by my own per-unit costs of production (\$5/book); I made back most of my initial investment.

I mention these details of cost, composition, design, production, and distribution for reasons that I hope will become clear in the ensuing pages. For now, I should add that I introduced the VQ Guide as part of a larger effort to explore the ‘vision quest’ tradition, broadly speaking, on at least three levels: as a conceptual antecedent to modern education; as a structuring metaphor for student-teacher interaction; and as methodological substrate for composition and production activities using new media devices. In short, by way of the vision quest motif, and within the context of this particular first-year writing course, I wanted not only to test the learning-as-journey idea at a “high-tech” university but also to mobilize the ‘quest’ of deliberate questioning as a way to motivate and inspire student interest in research writing activities. The VQ Guide thus opened by inviting students, individually and collectively, to “go on a ‘vision quest’ and to *construct a vision* in writing” (10). As one component of the vision quest plan, I asked students to set up dedicated blogs (using Blogger.com) for use in the course. Each student’s research blog functioned as the main interface, the primary locale, for generating, composing, and ordering all research and writing materials specific to this course.

No doubt the VQ Guide and its informing metaphor were the result of my own plans, efforts, and wants, focused in advance with the express purpose of creating an inspired, computer-assisted writing course that student writers would find compelling, rewarding, and, yes, transforming. I introduced the vision quest model (via the VQ Guide and other instruments and activities discussed below) as an experiment in textual and technological intervention designed to measure (1) the effects of new media writing activities, in this case research blogging, on first-year writers and their writing; (2) the benefits and drawbacks of using blog technology at a large, urban university committed to “high-tech education”; (3) student perceptions and attitudes about blog use, and technology more generally, in the writing classroom and in the context of my vision quest experiment; and (4) my own assumptions and expectations as a writing teacher committed to progressive, libertarian, and anarchist teaching philosophies, some of which intersect quite explicitly with the discourse of emancipation surrounding computers, the Internet, and today’s “post-media” writing machines (Manovich ##). Simply put, I went into this course hoping to have a meaningful conversation with students about writing and writing technologies in the midst of a larger conversation about the purpose and function of higher education in 2007. What remains to be seen, of course, is how my own assumptions, expectations, and philosophical

predilections intersected with theirs. In this study, I report on that conversation, relying largely on my own pre-developed questions and propositions set against the students' written responses, reflections, and commentaries.

This course was life-changing (or so, at least, I want to believe) in large part because it could not be otherwise. As I try to demonstrate below, the expectation of transformation that anchors, and arguably defines, the modern educational project made a certain kind of change inevitable, especially if we take for granted, at face value, the testimonies of students likewise committed to educational progress and their ultimate 'arrival' as itinerant learners. The conclusion, one might say, is foregone. However, my goal here is neither to bolster nor debunk the grounding myth of educational transformation; rather, I want to show how its logic plays out when the expectation of transformation meets a set of related expectations regarding computers, the Internet, and new media writing technologies. That expectation of change (growth, development) itself changes under the influence of new media techniques. Understanding those layers of change, finally, is helpful to a larger multiliteracies project within which research blogging is just one possible learning tool among many. In my conclusion, I suggest how my findings from this specific, localized study may be useful to that broader disciplinary conversation.