Using Digital Technology to Augment a Critical Literacy Approach to First-Year Composition

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Abstract
As one reads the proliferating literature on the uses of the computer to teach first-year composition (FY Comp), a pivotal, nagging question arises, particularly if one has grounding in critical theory: "What constitutes responsible, democratic, liberatory use of the computer in education?" If this question cannot be satisfactorily answered, the increasingly heavy reliance on the computer in the classroom must be reconsidered. In any event, educators certainly must cease their unquestioning acceptance of the computer-as-panacea for education's "ills," and must also begin to render problematical...

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Using Digital Technology to Augment a Critical Literacy Approach to First-Year Composition

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... the most ambitious undertaking is not to storm the hegemonic barricades. Instead, we should do the intellectual work we know best: helping students to read and write and think in ways that both resist domination and exploitation and encourage self-consciousness about who they are and can be in the social world.
—John Clifford (1991, p. 51)

As one reads the proliferating literature on the uses of the computer to teach first-year composition (FY Comp), a pivotal, nagging question arises, particularly if one has grounding in critical theory: “What constitutes responsible, democratic, liberatory use of the computer in education?” If this question cannot be satisfactorily answered, the increasingly heavy reliance on the computer in the classroom must be reconsidered. In any event, educators certainly must cease their unquestioning acceptance of the computer-as-panacea for education’s “ills,” and must also begin to render problematical
the influence of business on education. These goals underlie my hope for the future of digital computing’s alliance with education, and for them to be realized, educators absolutely must begin to demand more intellectualism and ruthless questioning from teachers and students alike. A productive and responsible marriage of digital technology and education is possible, if educators can develop this necessary agency in themselves and their students.

My purpose, therefore, in this chapter is to explore the possible ways in which digital technology can be used in a critical literacy-cultural studies approach to FY Comp. Because of my work with first-year students, with teaching assistants (TAs) who teach them, and because of the extent to which we teach FY Comp in a computer-mediated environment at my university, the previously stated question urgently becomes, “How can we instantiate this responsible, thoughtful, liberatory use of the computer in the FY Comp classroom?” Because of my immersion on a daily basis with the “What-can-I-do-with-them-on Monday-morning?” sort of concerns, I discuss some types of activities and assignments FY Comp students might undertake to make use of and think about the technology in ways that permit their self-reflectiveness and their reflectiveness about their culture and its background assumptions, particularly those about technology, hence, using the computer both as content and as means to foster critical literacy, an endeavor Haas (1996) described as looking both at and through digital technology.

"THE CHANGE HAS OCCURRED"

Increasing numbers of sections of FY Comp are being taught in the computer lab on either a full- or part-time basis, and there is no reason to think, or even to wish, that the situation is going to reverse itself. Computer literacy is now a part of academic literacy, and to the extent that curricula have always been influenced by the demands of business and the government, the computer is not a surprising part of the educational landscape. I use Iowa State University (ISU), an institution currently serving approximately 6,000 students a year in FY courses, as a convenient case in point of the speed and enthusiasm with which computers were introduced to composition classes. In something less than 7 years beginning in the late 1980s, ISU built 11 computer classrooms to be used primarily as English composition classrooms. Looking at representative semesters and academic years since 1992, in the 1994-1995 school year, 116 out of 218 sections of FY Comp were taught in a computer lab on either an enhanced or an intensive basis (a section comprises 26 students). In the fall of 1995, 148 sections of FY Comp were scheduled, 103 of which were conducted in a lab at least once a week.
In 1996, the percentage of FY Comp sections using a computer lab averaged 67% over the two semesters. In 1997, that percentage grew to 81%. Overall, in the period beginning in 1992 and ending with the fall semester of 1997, the percentage of FY Comp classes using a computer lab grew steadily from 21% in the spring of 1992 to 87% in the spring of 1997.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, although this infusion of digital technology may have taken place at a faster pace and with perhaps more cutting-edge technology, what has happened at ISU in these FY Comp classes is not significantly unlike other schools’ experiences, and it certainly parallels well the time frames and measures Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe (1997) used in their book, *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994: A History*.

Clearly, the educational use of digital technology is here to stay. I do not think I am begging the question to acquiesce to that. Indeed, the prevailing thinking in college composition is summed up by Moran (1992): “The change has occurred; it would be foolish to pretend that it has not . . . [and at the end of the process, the system will function differently; indeed, it will be a different system]” (p. 35). Educators are, therefore, surely impelled to develop a view of educational computing that “in no way confines us to a stultified compulsion to push on blindly with technology or, what comes to the same thing, to rebel helplessly against it” (Heidegger, cited in Dreyfus, 1995, italics added).

**CRITICAL COMPUTER LITERACY**

One route to accomplishing the reflective and rhetorical goals in FY Comp (empowering students with the use of academic literacy and its embedded computer literacy without co-opting them by either, indeed, developing *critical computer literacy*) is to introduce them to and cultivate the habit of uncovering and critiquing both their own constructed and contingent experiences and resulting worldviews, particularly those that influence society’s relation with technology. FY Comp can and should be the site where students begin to develop the requisite cognitive skills to participate in the complexity of the academic community and to participate in a “critique of ideology and culture, of the hidden forces of institutional and social structures that shape thought and give meaning to our lives” (S. Greene, 1990, p. 160). Instructors can identify and problematize certain topics or themes that students read, write, and talk about, and the computer’s role in their lives is certainly one such topic. Lazere (1982, 1992), Kennedy, Neuwirth, Straub, and Kaufer (1994), Boyd (1991), and others believe in the usefulness of a
"popular culture," or "media studies," approach to FY Comp wherein students critically examine how various aspects of popular culture affect them, as well as recover how their individual educational experiences have been molded by their immersion in popular culture. As my ensuing description of activities shows, I suggest making the computer a part of the content of the course, available for critique, as well as part of the course environment in which students write, read, and interact with each other.

FY Comp is recognized as a particularly important site of acculturation, initiation, and more recently, potentially, of hegemonic resistance for new college students. Because students have the opportunity to find their own voices; to develop critical reading, writing, and thinking strategies; and also to accommodate and assimilate the academic discourse community’s conventions, FY Comp stands uniquely if somewhat problematically on the cusp between reproduction of the dominant ideology and the empowerment of students to resist and change it. Miller (1991) described FY Comp as the course particularly well suited for "counterhegemonic intellectual politics" (p. 52). Lunsford (1990), in her address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, described our position thus:

As teachers of writing have always been, we are dangerous precisely because we threaten the equilibrium, the status quo. We tip over the melting pot and allow for the play of difference by enabling others, our student colleagues, to compose themselves, to write themselves into being and hence to write a new and different narrative, one populated by many different and differing voices. (p. 76)

The advent of computers in the composition classroom was and continues to be heralded as an unprecedented pedagogical and democratic contribution to education, although many compositionists and educational theorists have come to question this utopian view of the computer as neutral tool, "great equalizer," and source of unsurpassed liberatory literacy. Although it may well have this potential, nevertheless college composition teachers cannot “continue to ignore the ways tools implicate and are implicated in the power relations, or more broadly, the ideologies, permeating reading and writing acts” (Kaplan, 1991, p. 14). Given the increasingly heavy use of computers in classrooms, scholars in the fields both of computers and composition and of critical theory of technology have stressed the importance of students and teachers alike being able to think critically about the computer (Apple, 1991; Bowers, 1988; Feenberg, 1991, 1995; Feenberg & Hannay, 1995; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Hlynka & Belland, 1991; Murphy & Pardeck, 1985; Selfe & Hilligoss, 1994; Selfe & Selfe, 1994; Takayoshi, 1996). Computers in the classroom must be understood as “com-
plexly crafted mirrors that we ourselves have shaped, as cultural artifacts that reflect our society and its ideologies, our educational system and its values” (Selfe & Hilligoss, 1994, p. 1). Computers-and-composition scholars as well as those in the critical theory of technology, stress that computers are not neutral, “transparent” tools, as they are so easily and popularly assumed to be—they do not unproblematically mediate between us and the tasks we undertake with them—and when educators and their students conceptualize them this way, we overlook or rationalize many of their effects. As Bowers (1988) put it, educators unreflectively perpetuate “a number of unexamined traditions of thought that reproduce in the present the misconceptions of the past” (p. ix).

Specifically, computers in education are believed by many scholars to further a worldview that uncritically glorifies the technological consumer domain of society: attitudes toward technological innovation, the progressive nature of change, measurement and planning as sources of authority, a conceptual hierarchy that places abstract-theoretical thought at the highest, a competitive-remissive form of individualism, and the definition of human needs in terms of what can be supplied by a commodity culture. (Bowers, 1988, p. 6)

Feenberg (1991) characterized the same sort of worldview as “possessive individualism,” an outlook based in and furthered by capitalism, in which the “little god, the modern subject sees itself as autonomous, as independent of the system on which it operates through technical means . . . thus plac[ing] itself beyond the web of the consequences of its own actions” (p. 112). As these quotations indicate, technology is more than just neutral machines; it is what Apple (1991) described as a “form of thinking that orients a person to approach the world in a certain way [and includes] . . . the very ways in which students are taught to think about their education, their future roles in society, and the place of technology in that society” (pp. 75-76).

**THE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE**

Since the impact of FY Comp on students is arguably so intense, educators must critically examine and remain doggedly vigilant about the underlying sociopolitical implications of the technology they use as compounded by the sociopolitical relations that already exist in the classroom. Thus, because the computer has the ability to equalize power use and information coverage, and because of the capitalistic structure that designed and maintains it and
within which instructors and students work, the computer offers itself as a particularly convenient if not urgent topic for critical inquiry and also as a tool (although certainly not a neutral one!) in the FY Comp class.

Digital technology profoundly affects assumptions about literacy because it “defin[es] the medium of communication, [and thus] creates the very atmosphere in which we function . . .” (Tuman, 1992, p. 5). Although educators must guard against the machine becoming the center of the class, with curriculum, teachers, and students relegated to peripheral positions, Lazere (1982) asserted the following:

In a society whose information environment is immensely sophisticated, ability to gain access to, understand, and critically evaluate the dominant modes of discourse . . . is an essential survival skill—not only for conforming to the dominant culture, but for resisting or opposing its manipulations of information and rhetoric. (p. 14, italics added)

And Green (1993) agreed that students need to become competent with “extant discourses and texts” while developing the ability and predilection to carry out “critical analyses and innovative reconstruction of those same discourses and texts” (p. ix). The metaphor of playing a game one is committed to while also being willing to change the rules of the game (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Donald, 1993) is one that I find particularly powerful and useful with both TAs and freshmen. Streibel (1991) envisioned students becoming “empowered and liberated citizens in a computer-saturated society . . . by being able to stand above it and shape it to their own ends” (p. 361), whereas Sullivan and Qualley (1994) said that educators can never “master or transcend” but can nevertheless help students to “participate critically in the discourses that shape their lives” (p. ix). If one’s goal is to guide students to the realization that they make meaning but do so within an ideological framework that comes to seem natural, inevitable, and immutable, FY Comp becomes the ideal place to work intensively on this, as it is where both academic and technological discourses converge and where students are approaching the cognitive maturity to become critical thinkers.

CRITICAL LITERACY IN FY COMP

University composition instructors believe that the ability to express oneself in writing “clearly and truly” (Lunsford, 1992, p. 346) coupled with critical thinking are the means to empowerment in our political, social, and eco-
onomic system (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Lunsford, 1992; McCormick, 1994). Certainly some cornerstones of critical thinking are the related abilities to deal with ambiguity and contradictions and being willing to consider an issue from many sides. Perhaps foremost in descriptions of critical thinking is the willingness to listen to, even to seek out, alternative viewpoints and being willing to change one’s mind in the light of new and compelling reasons to do so. Critical thinking in a composition class involves, among other skills, being able to make judgments about and build on new ideas (Capossela, 1993) through a dialectical process of accepting feedback from others, by reading, and by selectively incorporating new material into one’s own statements through the processes of analysis, summary, and synthesis (Kennedy et al., 1994).

An important part of the work to be done in FY Comp, if one is to overcome the student resistance, is to help students see the ways in which they have been influenced by the mainstream discourse community (Caulfield, 1995; Villanueva, 1991) and the ways in which technology, as part of the mainstream discourse, has constructed their lives. Given that critical thinking involves learning to perceive and reflect on contradictions between students’ long-unquestioned understanding of how the world is “supposed to be,” and what, in fact, their experience in the world has been (Brookfield, 1987), their worldview must be rendered problematical, a process that is sometimes uncomfortable for students. But how hard do educators push students to recognize imbalances in power relations without risking students’ hardening their original positions? To what extent do educators make their own beliefs a part of the classroom, and if they don’t, are they being dishonest? How do they avoid “deconstructing” their students’ worldviews and leaving them with relativism? Like many others grappling with this question, I believe educators have to create opportunities for students to recognize a gap between what they have been led by dominant, egalitarian stereotypes and ideology to expect (in this case, relative to digital technology in education) and what their reality has been, because “[w]e become aware of our potential to remake knowledge only after we remember that something is always missing . . . learning starts with the sensation of being trapped” (Spellmeyer, 1993, p. 187; Ryder, 1995). Thomas (1993) described this undertaking as the “modest re-thinking of some comfortable thoughts” (p. 17) and Dewey (1929) likened this process of critical inquiry, this questioning of assumptions, to “intellectual disrobing,” pointing out that while we can of course never wholly transcend our ideological influences, “intellectual furthering of culture demands that we take them off [our ideological ‘clothes’], inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us” (cited in Jones, 1996, p. 95, italics added).
Yes, this is anxiety-producing for some students (and instructors). Perhaps the most paradoxically frustrating and exciting aspect of teaching FY Comp at a large, non-elite, conservative, midwestern university is the introduction of a cultural studies-critical literacy approach in FY Comp. The resistance one can encounter from students when one attempts anything remotely akin to a Freirean liberatory pedagogy (and I use the term in the loosest possible sense) can be the source of frustration as well as challenge for the FY Comp instructor, especially when that instructor is a novice TA. The instructor can meet with resistance that ranges from apathy to defensiveness to outright challenge. The instructor can be seen as the alien intellectual authority, and “[t]o students who are not convinced they want their consciousness transformed...the Freirean pedagogy can be as coercive as any traditional one” (Graff, 1994, p. 183).

The subjectivity first-year students have naturally constructed for themselves will sometimes resist our efforts at critical literacy and critical computer literacy in predictable ways: objectification (“This is the way everything should be”), social meliorism (“Things were worse in the past; the present is an improvement”), pragmatism (“Do what you can with specific problems, and the overall situation will improve”), demonology (“A few bad guys are responsible for the questionable use of educational computing”), and individual autonomy (“I can individually rise above the irresponsible use of technology”) (Fitts & France, 1994). These reactions can be attributed to, among other things, the conservative backgrounds of many students (as Graff, 1994, pointed out, a critical literacy approach “assumes that the needs of the students naturally coincide with the outlook of radical politics,” although I would stipulate that the students’ needs are their self-defined needs at this juncture in their growth, given their backgrounds, education, and development). The expected level of cognitive maturity of the students in this age range, the unavoidably asymmetrical power relationship between teacher and students (Graff, 1994), and the students’ reluctance or inability to deal with uncertainty are also factors that the FY Comp instructor using a critical literacy-cultural studies approach must understand. Obviously, recognizing that this resistance arises from hegemonic influences and is exacerbated by 18-year-old cognitive maturity and natural unwillingness to part with comfortable certainty for messy contradictions and questions is helpful to instructors. If one wants to promote a change in thinking, one must remain mindful of adult cognitive development. It is also important to remember that “anxiety is part and parcel of the learning process” (Paine, 1989, p. 565) and that “negation of tension amounts to the illusion of overcoming these tensions when they are really just hidden” (Freire cited in Bizzell, 1992, p. 65).
"MORE INCLUSIVE, DISCRIMINATING, PERMEABLE, AND INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVES . . ."

Critical thinking thus involves the concepts of emancipatory learning, reflective learning, and from cognitive psychology, dialectical thinking (Brookfield, 1987). This last is especially useful because it represents a way that two competing paradigms for understanding the teaching of composition—the individual/cognitive and the social epistemic—can be productively combined with digital technology playing a role. A "cognitive-social epistemic" in the composition classroom can foster the student's realization that the formation of his/her subjectivity is the result of "dialectical interplay of an individual consciousness and ideological forces . . . interactions between agency and history" (S. Greene, 1990, pp. 150-151). A crucial type of engagement that moves students along to more useful ways of dealing with the world, identified by Basseches (1984) and Benack (1984) as dialectical thinking, involves empathy and an epistemology that recognizes multiple, competing worldviews (Caulfield, 1995; Hays & Brandt, 1992). Basseches called dialectical thinking an adult form of reasoning that helps the student out of his or her limited, egoistic self and toward "a collective good" (p. 8). Piaget laid the childhood-based groundwork for this epistemology in his stages of development wherein individuals move from "less . . . to more adequate ways of knowing or thinking about their universe . . . 'more adequate' structures of knowing are those which are less egocentric (or ethnocentric) and able to integrate a broader range of dimensions of experience and perspectives upon that experience" (Basseches, 1984, p. 8).

Lest there be doubt about what "more adequate structures of knowing" are, Mezirow (1990) quite clearly described them thus: "More inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives are superior perspectives" (p. 14). And Basseches (1984) viewed dialectical thinking as a productive way out of what is otherwise a universalistic-formalist versus relativistic dead-end in students' thinking.

The development of analytical thinking skills, and hence personal empowerment, Streibel and Garhart (1985) agreed, requires that one's ideas develop dialectically around others' in a supportive but critical "learning community" focused on confrontation with a problematic topic. Boyd (1991) and others advance computer-mediated conferencing as an ideal way to achieve some of these goals, for participants (with moderating) theoretically have an equal chance to express their ideas and to benefit from others'. Although the computer certainly has the potential to create negative effects in the classroom, those pedagogically one might associate with modernity—universalizing truth; de-skilling teachers and students; isolating students and
solidifying the authority of the teacher; “homogenizing the content of the curriculum, regulating its management, and evaluating its outcomes” (Reid, 1993, p. 22)—the computer just as certainly can be used by the critical FY Comp instructor in ways that take advantage of its postmodern possibilities: encouraging the social and communitarian rather than the individual and autonomous, destabilizing the authority of text and teacher, bringing multiple viewpoints into play rather than privileging one apparently objective perspective. Electronic conferencing can create what M. Greene (1994) referred to as “openings” (p. 1), which make room for students’ thinking and interaction to develop; such conferencing can also provide an outlet for what Cooper and Selfe (1990), appropriating Bakhtin, called “internally persuasive” discourse, which often opposes “authoritarian” discourse and permits students to work in discourse which is resistant as well as that which enjoys society’s validation.

Before proceeding with ways in which one can use the computer in a critical literacy-cultural studies approach to FY Comp, I must acknowledge that its benefit in a composition course cannot be underestimated in at least two rather utilitarian but important ways. First, the computer can take over some of the lower-level writing tasks (spellchecking, moving text, formatting) so that the writer can devote him or herself to higher level cognitive decisions about the text (audience analysis; evidence, reasoning, and diction choices). The computer can thus help a writer to gain more of the important kinds of control over his or her writing, while not creating total dependence on the technology (Nydahl, 1993). Second, because gaining control over one’s writing means learning to make reasoned choices, the computer can assist with this process as students can more easily function as “senders and receivers of communication, as questioners of purpose, as judges. . . [and the computer permits] the opportunity to question responses to their drafts as they draft . . . “ (Lunsford, 1992, p. 346). The computer thus encourages students to work recursively rather than linearly with their drafts, and also to continue revising in light of feedback and further thinking, rather than permitting the text to solidify into a “final solution.”

Although these may seem to be mere word-processing conveniences, for the FY Comp student who is not particularly eager to read, write, and/or express him or herself and low on skill and self-confidence in these areas, the computer can thankfully ease some of the physical and logistical difficulty of readying a paper (one’s thoughts) for someone else’s eyes. Assuming that students receive informed, patient, and consistent instruction on the uses of the computer as a word processor, it can ameliorate the often daunting obstacles first-year students face in simply getting started on a paper, and then, of going back into it later and genuinely improving it. The computer as word processor brings to the fore of the com-
posing process the vast possibilities of choice available to the student writers, and permits him/her to "try on" various of these iterations with ease (Nydahl, 1993; Takayoshi, 1996).

REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

But beyond its boon as a word processor, I suggest a framework for using the computer in a FY Comp class taking a cognitive-social epistemic and a critical literacy-cultural studies approach to popular media; digital technology has emancipatory potential, in the hands of a critical instructor, as both content and environment. By rendering problematical and available for critique the computer itself (as the first of perhaps two or three such topics for a semester, other possibilities being popular media's influence and gender roles, for instance) and by using the computer's networking capabilities both for conferencing and discussing and for reviewing classmates' papers, digital technology theoretically can enhance students' abilities to widen their worldviews. What follows, then, is a sketch of a possible FY Comp class' activities that attempts to realize critical literacy and rhetorical goals appropriate for the course.

Students might begin their semester reading widely on digital technology and its uses and abuses in society in general, and in education in particular. (The "texts" they work with need not necessarily be printed; they might also be visual media, like advertisements.) As suggested in the work of Villanueva (1991), Streibel and Garhart (1985), Jolliffe (1994), and Lazere (1982, 1992), students' readings should be sufficiently diverse so as to expose them to several perspectives on the problematic topic, both within and outside the mainstream. These juxtapositions of more traditional and nontraditional worldviews should help students begin to understand and entertain the possible validity of alternative perspectives. The readings; analyses thereof; subsequent conferences and discussion; and individual writing of summaries, analyses, autobiographical narratives, syntheses, and position papers should function cumulatively to help students approach an understanding of how structures of meaning come into existence and gain legitimacy (Caulfield, 1995; Villanueva, 1991).

Throughout the semester, for every text students read on the topic, they would complete an analysis questionnaire (on screen or on paper) identifying and articulating each claim the author makes along with its supporting material (Streibel & Garhart, 1985). Social psychologists and reading specialists explain that among the reasons readers fail to modify existing conceptions even after reading a persuasive and compelling text are their inability to sort out claim from evidence, to accurately comprehend the text.
if it espouses a viewpoint that calls their prior knowledge into question, to
construct parallel argument schemata for purposes of weighing evidence,
and to store evidence along with the belief in sophisticated networks of
schemata (Chambliss, 1994).

Besides building cognitive and affective processing skills then, this
level of analysis would also ask students to grapple with various critical
inquiry and rhetorical questions:

1. (About the essay’s topic in general—digital technology’s effect
   on society and education)—Why is this topic important?
2. What are this essay’s/author’s fundamental, perhaps unstated,
   assumptions about what is important to us? What/Whose interests
does this text seem to support?
3. Would you say this is a status quo position? Does it represent a
   common, fairly widely held way of thinking about this topic? Or
does it represent a somewhat new or different way of thinking
about the topic?
4. Whether or not the text represents the status quo, what/whose
   interests are served by the status quo position on this topic?
5. (Getting into rhetorical analysis a bit)—What metaphors or basic
   ways of using language has this author used to help make his/her

As the semester progresses and students become more adept at ana­
lyzing what they read, they can begin to dig deeper into both rhetorical and
critical analysis. A modified version of the questions Rothe (1991) recom­
pended to evaluate software can be applied to texts. These questions fall
into six categories, as follows:

1. Language Usage (How do dominant metaphors reinforce implicit
   assumptions the author seems to have about the world and the
   topic?)
2. Knowledge (Does the essay take as automatically “right” the per­
   spective of a particular political camp, social group, economic
   interest, or geographical area?)
3. Ideology (Can you identify a line of reasoning or a particular
   worldview in the essay? Possibilities might be a science-based
   perspective, militaristic, technicist, business/management-orient­
ed, or consumeristic ways of approaching the world).
4. Profit (What economic perspective does the author espouse?
   Does the author seem to promote efficiency and mass appeal? Or
   perhaps environmental and/or communitarian economics?)
5. Culture (What “culture-specific assumptions on lifestyle, community, language, family, history, etc” can you identify?)


Obviously, entering their analyses into the dialectic of the class, via networked conferencing or small-group discussion, will be essential in students’ development of mature and tolerant perspectives.

An integral component of this course’s approach to helping students discover the underlying traditions and accompanying assumptions that they heretofore have been unconscious to will be the students’ recovery of their own experiences with the topic, looking hard and honestly at how they may have been shaped by their encounters with the topic (digital technology, for instance) and how their societally induced expectations about it may not have been met. Villanueva (1991) asked students to connect their experiences to the reading by writing “a set series [of assignments] about conflicts they have had to confront, and to consider the sources of those conflicts” (p. 259, italics added). Takayoshi (1996) also recommended the autobiographical narrative as a means of prompting students to understand how they have been influenced by societal messages about digital technology. Aside from the autobiographical narrative, which may seem too personal and invasive to some students, instructors can alternatively ask them to write arguments that support their positions, asking them to look to their experiences for at least some of their evidence. Conceiving and writing an argument generated out of dialectical encounters with others and with readings can also lead students to the sort of understanding we seek, for it can create a “productive tension” and the “methodology of argument demands that students learn a process of accountability to themselves and others for the versions of reality they embrace” (Kennedy et al., 1994, p. 252). For these assignments, as with the others, the instructor must model or participate in the activity. For instance, if students are asked to write about how they came to a perspective, the instructor needs to be able to do that him or herself, and share it with the students (LaDuc, 1994). Student papers might be collected in a class computer file for purposes of sharing and discussing, and again, the discussion can sometimes take place over the network, so that “internally persuasive” discourse can emerge.

Journals and short creative writing assignments can also be useful, particularly in asking students to experiment with perspectives they encounter in readings. Not only can this help accomplish the overall goals in the course (helping students “try on” different viewpoints and make their
own more flexible) but it is also a way to deal with resistance. For instance, after reading a series of essays that describe digital technology in education in the form of “problem cases,” the instructor can ask students to write short stories that make themselves either the victim of the problem, or that describe the problem in such a way that their audience would be convinced the problem exists and it is significant (Kennedy et al., 1994).

Although a course “blueprint” cannot satisfactorily address the root question I have posed about digital technology in education—Can it be used in emancipatory ways, and if so, what would that look like?—it is a necessary first step in moving beyond the theoretical and the concerned hand-wringing stage one may feel stuck in. Obviously, this course would not require the computer lab environment for each class period (computer-intensive), but would clearly benefit from the computer-enhanced setting (class in the lab every second or third meeting). The critical literacy-cultural studies goals can be accomplished without the computer at all, certainly, but the realities of many FY Comp courses make this an opportunity to turn that inquiry to digital technology, so that educators can model responsible ways to think about and use it for their students. None of this will work well, however, if teachers do not undertake some counterhegemonic thinking ourselves, coming to understand ourselves by understanding the peculiarly constructed-yet-negotiable nature of subjectivity and agency. Nor will it work if educators are not informed about adult cognitive development, the critical theory of technology, and computer pedagogy in FY Comp classrooms. The point is that having digital technology in classrooms certainly need not preclude educators from and can even assist them in “transcending the given, of entering a field of possibilities”:

We are only likely to do that, however, when we become aware of something lacking in the world around us as seen from our situated vantage points. We have to exert ourselves to name what we see around us (the hungers, the passivity, the homelessness, the inarticulateness) and reach out somehow, not only to envisage and imagine, but to repair. (M. Greene, 1994, p. 2)

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