# Re-Media-ting Remedial Education with Web 2.0: Implications for Community College Writing Across the Curriculum Programs

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**Abstract:** The community college environment demands that educators embrace remedial education across all levels and all disciplines. Since few WAC/WID programs exist at this level, faculty need to be committed to assisting students in their reading and writing skills to offer further practice to those requiring remediation. The web offers faculty and students a wealth of interactive and engaging applications that can "re-mediate" remedial education. This article provides suggestions on how such applications can enhance writing across the curriculum.

## Introduction

New technology gadgets spring up from the market place promising to revolutionize what occurs in the classroom, and instructors often scramble to adapt their teaching to the latest new "thing" in education. Educating students in the 21st century does require some adaptation to enhance student critical thinking, problem solving and collaborative skills, but instructors should be mindful of how best to educate rather than entertain students in the classroom. The issue is how to better engage students in today's college classrooms, and in no place is this more important than community college campuses whose open door policies present particular challenges in providing a 21st century education. Often the students as well as the classrooms in the community college are on the wrong side of the digital divide. Furthermore, a significant number of community college students require remedial education. This article looks at how community colleges, many of which lack WAC/WID programs, can encourage faculty to re-mediate remedial education by providing more opportunities for students to write within the disciplines.

## Literally, The Next New "Thing"

The latest technical buzz surrounds Apple's newest marvel, the iPad. No thanks to its name, people are scrambling to classify what the iPad really is. It is apparently so innovative, it can't be defined: not quite a laptop, more than an electronic book reader, the iPad sits somewhere in the middle. Ironically, this innovative tool simply combines the features from many of Apple's other products, here repurposed and repackaged. Yet even before the official release of the iPad set for early April 2010 a March 30, 2010 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s Blog, *The Wired*

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*Campus* announced that Seton Hill, a private liberal arts college in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, will supply all of its more than 2,100 students with an iPad. *The Chronicle* cites the provost and dean of the faculty, Mary Ann Gawelek from Seton Hill, who explained, "the iPad was chosen by Seton Hill because of its mobility and the ease with which faculty and students, in the future, will have immediate access to e-textbooks and comprehensive and integrated learning" (Laster, 2010). So even before the release of the product, faculty will be expected to revolutionize their courses with the iPad. In fact, in the January 2009 Special Issue of *Across the Disciplines*, Karen Lunsford acknowledges that the emergence of such new technologies has left educators scrambling to keep up with the "Next New Thing." Her use of "Next New Things," to me, evokes an image of some sort of *The Cat in the Hat* characters that have arrived on scene to stir up a ruckus while professors run around trying to adapt to what these technologies bring—even before they're unleashed.

## Re-Media-tion and WAC 2.0

With the current barrage of technical media, the iPad itself is—to borrow the term from Bolter and Grusin (1999)—an example of "remediation" (read as re-MEDIA-tion). In Bolter and Grusin's book titled *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, they argue that what we consider innovative new media are simply repurposed and repackaged forms of an older medium, that new media—such as websites—rely on theories of media from the past, such as the newspaper, and are merely new forms of an old rule, thus re-mediation. The iPad is part iPod, part internet book reader, part tablet; it too relies on (dare I say) old forms and packages them in a shiny new case, a case I'm certain Seton Hill students will excitedly wait in line to pick up after the world anxiously waited four months to see the actual product and what the hype was all about. The question remains: will this sweeping new implementation of technology engage students and provide innovative yet effective teaching? Or will students just end up with yet another classroom distraction under the guise of innovative teaching and learning?

The iPad is just another technology used to change the teaching game in a long list of other gadgets for the classroom: Smart boards, Smart classrooms, clickers, PDAs, etc. Yet complaints about student distractions in the classroom are commonplace in education today with the endless types of gadgets students carry with them to stay "tuned in" often for the sake of "tuning out" what is happening in class. Is it wise on college campuses to add yet another distraction to the mix? It is no surprise to today's educators that in his discussion, "The Machine is (Changing)/US: YouTube and the Politics of Authenticity," Michael Wesch (2009) suggests that today's learners are disengaged and fragmented. And in no place is this more apparent than on today's community college campuses. Many of us in education place the blame on the distractions new technology and increasing access to new digital media provide, even while students sit face to face with us in our classrooms. Today's millennial learners are quite accustomed to being "plugged in" to technology, clicking and linking themselves through the interactive media world of Web 2.0. Students are less engaged in the static, information-distribution of the older version of the web. Now they are more than hyperlinked, they are hyper-connected through applications that promote interactivity and social networking, such as, Wikipedia, blogs, *facebook*, etc. Wesch, however, argues that it is through new media such as Web 2.0 applications, that students can become more engaged and less fragmented. The media that created disengagement and fragmentation, according to Wesch, was the result of media controlled by the few, disseminated to the masses for a one-way exchange (i.e. television). He argues that these new media can "change the game" because they are "not controlled by the few, and "not one-way"; they were "created by, for, and around networks, not masses" and "transform individual pursuits into a collective action." Web 2.0 is literally "for the people, by the people"; thus, as students are given a

voice, their voices become less fragmented and their contribution to the community becomes immersive.

Weiss and Baird (2010) applied this notion of Web 2.0's inclusivity to Writing Across the Curriculum in their Educause Learning Initiative presentation "WAC 2.0: Rethinking Writing Across the Curriculum in the Age of the Participatory Web (Learning Technology)." They posit that the social interactivity of Web 2.0 alters the dynamic between student and text, which is important in WAC initiatives, which should deemphasize the product and focus on the process of writing given that writing is a medium for learning and for understanding (Fulwiler, 1984). The pressures to publish polished yet static pieces of writing for print give way to informal, exploratory writing and the freedom to write and rewrite in the dynamic and every-changing environment of Web 2.0. Websites are constantly changing, redefining the very process of writing; the final product is obsolete just as it is published on the web. It is the interactivity of Web 2.0 and the multimodal exchanges permitted in Web 2.0 that can improve student engagement and connect them to a collective effort that is especially embraced by a Writing Across the Curriculum program. Digital technologies' Next New Things can be useful in Writing in the Disciplines and Writing to Learn programs aimed at engaging students in and assessing students through writing. Blogs, Wikis, social networking sites, course management systems along with numerous other technologies can offer students and instructors the learning environment they need, encouraging students to practice writing in the disciplines while learning course content.

## Community College Remediation through Re-mediation

One particular area where these Next New Things can have a profound impact with student and instructor users alike are within the unique learning environments of community colleges, especially their Writing Across the Curriculum programs. Community colleges open the doors of education to the community. Community college education is, by its mission, inclusive (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). Likewise, new digital media open the doors to virtual communities where, as Wesch points out, everyone has a voice and an identity. YouTube's tag says "Broadcast Yourself," inviting the community in. Even the title "YouTube," suggests that you, the individual, matter. YouTube is an obvious remediation of television; however, there is no exclusivity in this web 2.0 application as there once was for who could broadcast on television. Similarly, community colleges offer an open-access education with no exclusivity of who can attend.

Unique to community colleges is a population that requires developmental and basic skills education in math and English. The American Association of Community Colleges (2010) notes that the term "remedial education" is the more widely accepted term "to label preparatory programs or courses of study that develop basic skills to proficiency levels required for success in regular college-level, college-credit courses" (Schultz, n.d.). Those who find themselves underprepared for college-level courses upon arrival at the community college likely feel more distant and disengaged given their limited preparation and exposure to higher education. As Wesch (2009) claims, students today feel isolated and out of touch with what is happening in their classrooms. Those needing remediation are often more isolated and out of touch with what is happening in their classrooms. Many remedial courses offer no college credit, suggesting students in these courses are in the game but only watching from the sidelines. These students often step foot in the door feeling, perhaps a bit out of place, evident when 89% of the students community colleges serve are marked "nontraditional" due to age, lapses in education, full-time employment, lack of a high school diploma, etc., or are "high-risk," a marker used for those who are academically underprepared (Millward, 2008).

While developmental students find the help they need through precollege reading, math and English courses, they may co-enroll in regular college courses, such as physical science, biology, history, etc. And this is a large section of the population community colleges serve. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2003), 42% of freshman at public, 2-year colleges in 2000 were enrolled in at least one remedial course of reading, writing or math. If professors of discipline-specific courses ask their students to write about course content, they can help this large population of developmental students build their writing skills, expanding the students' developmental education through practice. The unique population of students at community colleges along with the unique mission of community colleges to prepare these students for academic transfer and/or careers fit well with a WAC/WID initiative. Yet, according to Thaiss and Porter's (2010) survey of their WAC/WID mapping project, only 33% of U.S. community college respondents stated that they had a WAC program.

Developmental students have specific learning needs that professors in the disciplines might not be specially trained for. To compound this, professors may lack time to teach writing given specific course content to cover; they might lack time to provide valuable feedback with the volume of students they serve, and some may be intimidated to ask students to write, fearing their own lack of training in assessing and evaluating writing. This is precisely where these Next New Things can serve community college campuses. A WAC 2.0 approach, to borrow again from Weiss and Baird (2010), does not place emphasis on the final writing product but the process of learning through writing, thus decreasing the importance of "grading" all that writing, and students can work collaboratively to offer feedback to one another. Fulwiler (1984) proposes that peer collaboration can work if instructors use the process several times during a course rather than once or twice. Repeated collaborative peer review enhances student trust in offering and receiving peer feedback. Furthermore, Kenneth Bruffee (1984) suggests that the benefit of peer feedback and collaboration is not the specific feedback students give one another in peer review, but the conversation they have about writing.

Web 2.0 applications can engage students in activities that allow them to have a voice in discipline-specific conversations. The onus is on the instructor to simply open the doors to some of these Next New Things in an effort to increase writing practice (beneficial to all students), and remediation efforts. Certainly, no laptops nor iPads will likely await the arrival of community college students on campus—some will be lucky just to have books for class—but what can await their arrival is a commitment to teaching these students the basics of communicating in the academy, a commitment from across the academy using the innovative and immersive re-mediation technologies in an education that invites students to join a community that values their insight, perspectives and experiences and one that offers them the learning needed for a 21st century education.

## Thing 1 and Thing 2, 3, 4…

There is a seemingly endless list of web 2.0 applications with new ones popping up each day. A few of these "things" have caught on, such as blogs and wikis in teaching and writing across the curriculum, but there are a few more tools that are simple and—especially important with community college budgets—free to set up, like blogs and wikis, which also offer public forums for written communication. I list general applications and specific applications below:

## General Applications

- Blogs: The public writing forum of blogs are a natural fit for instructors committed to teaching content through writing. Students write about course content, and instructors and students can comment on one another's blogs.
- Wikis: A Wikis' typical use in higher education is a staging site for course content, a place for students to access information from the instructor. Instructors can use Wikis for more authentic learning as presented in Weiss and Baird's (2010) presentation. Instructors at the University of Illinois have actually created collaborative Wiki books in which the students were the contributors. Since the book was created in 2005, it has gone through a few years of revisions, thus becoming what Weiss refers to as an "artifact" that lasted beyond the classroom.
- Course Management Discussion Boards: There are as many course management or learning management systems lately as there are Web 2.0 applications, and many are open source content, such as Moodle and Sakai, which can open the ability to manage course content, such as lectures, handouts, links, etc. to any instructor or institution. Nearly a decade ago the Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum movement (Reiss, Selfe & Young, 1998) established asynchronous communication through online discussion boards as a way to engage students in writing about course content among their peers and their instructors. This discussion board forum has become an inherent part of writing across the curriculum programs and for good reason.
- Social Networking sites: One way to reach students today is through *facebook*, and it is no doubt with its 400 million active users—according to the *facebook*website—50% of which are on the site daily (Press Room, 2010). *facebook*'s widespread popularity can be tapped by instructors to create course groups for announcements, study sessions, discussions, media sharing etc. Other social networking sites, such as *Elgg*, can provide some anonymity for instructors and students, however, if they would like to keep their private and public "faces" separate.
- Podcasts: are self-made broadcasts in audio or video files. Instructors might create podcasts of mini-lectures or reviews for students, but to allow students into the conversation, instructors can ask students to create podcasts about course content to share with classmates or post on social mediated sites. Reo (2008) notes the specific WAC benefits of social media archive sites, suggesting that students learn audience by creating such podcasts.

## Specific Applications

- *Delicious*: a social bookmarking service, which allows users to save their web bookmarks online and share them with others. It also illustrates popular bookmarks for specific areas of interest. Through *Delicious* bookmarks, instructors can collect bookmarks for students to follow that are relevant to the course content. Instructors might use these cites for writing assignments or class discussions. Bookmarks can be accessed from any computer at any time, making it easy for instructors to access their materials at home, in their offices or right in class.
- *Slideshare*: users can upload and share their PowerPoint presentations (even with audio) as well as word documents and PDFs. Instructors might have students create and share PowerPoint presentations with the entire class, creating a webinar on a course topic.

- *Prezi*: a canvas-like presentation board, *Prezi* allows creators to combine text, images and multimedia, such as movies and websites for more interactive presentations. The concept allows the presenter and viewer to map out connections among material and focus in on topics like a large graphic organizer. While this tool might have a learning curve to it, the creative possibilities for connectivity and multimodal communication have significant potential for WAC/WID courses.
- *flikr*: while it is intended as an online photo management site, *flikr* allows users to add text. Students can create visual stories with added textual support and commentary (Reo 2008).
- *Google Docs*: allows users to upload presentations, documents and spreadsheets to share and/or collaborate with others. Through collaborative learning sessions, students can offer their perspective on various topics, in anonymous, yet synchronous, discussion.
- *Dropbox*: is a file management program that allows users to upload and sync files. Through this file sharing application (of movies, documents, presentations), instructors and students can save documents on a "cloud" to access, edit and save. File sharing through Dropbox can streamline the paper exchange for peer review and for collaborative assignments.
- *Skype*: allows user to make free audio and video calls via the internet. With this software, for example, instructors can invite students to interact with experts in the field in a lecture series with convenience not expense.
- *VoiceThread*: listed in Reo's (2008) "Web 2.0 Tools for Teaching Writing," this application enables group discussion around images, documents, presentations, etc. in various forms, such as text, audio, and video (webcam). Instructors and students could use this as a tool to look at sample student writing collectively. Reo (2008) offers this tool as a means for instructors to provide feedback on student writing and students to respond back to the instructor, engaging both in a dialogue about the writing.
- *Bubbl.us*: Inherent to writing as a process is navigating the pre-thinking/prewriting stage of writing. To commit students to this step of process writing, instructors can ask students to create brainstorms for various assignments and even share those mind maps with their peers. *Bubbl.us* creations can be uploaded to student blogs and websites.
- *Gliffy*: is a powerful diagram, flow-chart program that can illustrate concepts and relationships. *Gliffy* could also be helpful for mind maps preparatory to writing and assignments, but students might also create representations of data or information for written assignments.
- *YouTube*: How-tos, lectures, music, movies, advertisements, etc., posted to this social mediated site invite students to view re-mediated material that is applicable to their course content and offer commentary. In my own classes, YouTube videos offer follow-up to course readings and often spawn many course discussions and writing assignments.

## A Balancing Act: Too Many "Things"?

The Cat in the Hat attempts to juggle far too many "things" to amuse the children in the tale. In educating today's detached learner, we need to make certain that we are not performing and ill-fated balancing act of too many innovative Web 2.0 technologies just for the sake of entertainment. As in *The Cat in the Hat*, some "things" may disappear just as quickly as they appeared (as occurred in researching Web 2.0 applications for this article). This is a downside to creating innovative teaching activities that encourage writing in the disciplines. Innovation, however, is about change, and just as

students will have to learn and adapt to change in the 21st century, instructors will have to adapt to the change 21st century learning environments might bring. Toby Fulwiler (1984) mentions that for the sake of WAC, "teachers need to be awfully dedicated to make a new idea a regular part of their pedagogical repertoire" (p. 188). But couple the dynamics of teaching in a web-enhanced environment with the technical backbone and expertise required, and it is no wonder the juggle can become overwhelming for instructors. Lunsford describes some of the technical challenges, "for example, Sakai's out-of-the-box design allows an individual student to turn a paper into a "drop box" that only the instructor may access. To enable students to use the online workspaces to upload and download papers for collaboration and peer review, however, requires an instructor's ingenuity and technical workarounds."

Too many "things" can also overwhelm students. Excessive log-ins and training needed to use the various applications may frustrate more than familiarize students with writing, and those students who are not familiar with technology might certainly become even further disengaged, and it is often the students at the community college who "are on the wrong side of the digital divide" (Milward, 2008 p. 378). In the first national survey of 2-year colleges, instituted by the TYCA Research Initiative, Milward (2008) analyzes the survey responses in Technology and Pedagogy. One survey response echoes the lack of access for both instructors and students: "we have too few, too old and too broken computers. Many of our students have never used a computer before coming to school. Very few have computers at home. Some have access to them at school" (p. 382). The survey data illustrates that 46% of community colleges do not have a computer lab for every class meeting, 40% do not have a computer lab to schedule for class meetings, and 68% of campuses do not have web access within the classroom for instructors and students. This is quite a contrast to the iPads at Seton Hill.

## Frustration, Excitement, and Even Surprise

Re-MEDIA-tion is change rooted in theory that proved to work for the media of the past. Likewise, a remedial education should be rooted in appropriate learning theories. Instructors should be encouraged to adapt what works best for them and their content area along with what works best to engage community college students in reading and writing in the disciplines. Sometimes this requires experimentation, which might lead to the perfect fit. Toby Fulwiler (1984) describes the environments that best suit WAC, which sounds very similar to community colleges, "public schools where faculty have fairly high teaching loads and medium to low research and publication pressure" (pp. 118-119), yet warns that these strategies need to be practical given the heavy teaching loads at such colleges. Similarly, the implementation should be practical for students, that is, facilitating learning through writing while preparing students to communicate in 21st century collaborative discourse communities. So which "thing" works best? At the close of Fulwiler's (1984) "How well does writing across the curriculum work?" he quotes advice from his dissertation adviser when Fulwiler embarked on innovative, experimental initiatives. The advice works for instructors looking to find the next best thing: "What works, works," but Fulwiler adds "not all the time, nor for everyone, and sometimes better than we guessed" (p. 125). As instructors embark on adding the Next New Things to their written assignments across the curriculum, they should expect to be a few things: frustrated, excited and even pleasantly surprised.

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