Introduction: Open Source Composition Texts Arrive for College Writers

by Robert E. Cummings

This is the introduction for *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing,* Volume 1, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom. The volume is published through Parlor Press.

The full volume and individual chapter downloads are available for free from the following sites:

- Writing Spaces: http://writingspaces.org/essays
- Parlor Press: http://parlorpress.com/writingspaces
- WAC Clearinghouse: http://wac.colostate.edu/books/

Print versions of the volume are available for purchase directly from Parlor Press and through other booksellers.

To learn about participating in the Writing Spaces project, visit the Writing Spaces website at http://writingspaces.org/.

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Let me ask you this: which of the following statements is most memorable?[*]

A) Hasta la vista, baby.

B) I need your clothes, your boots, and your motorcycle.

C) I'll be bahk.

D) From government to non-profit organizations, teachers to textbook publishers, we all have a role to play in leveraging twenty-first century technology to expand learning and better serve California's students, parents, teachers and schools.

If you answered "D," you might need to get out more often. But you will probably be proven correct.

Of course all of these statements are the pronouncements of California's current governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. While in the first three instances he serves as a robotic killing machine (*Terminator 2* and *The Terminator*), in the last statement he serves as a harbinger of

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a major change in the way textbooks are written, reviewed, published, and distributed in America ("Free Digital"). Long after the Terminator is terminated in our collective pop culture memories, the effects of open source textbooks will be felt.

The arrival of open source texts for the classroom is coming in fits and starts, but with the debut of the first volume of *Writing Spaces*, college writing students can now join the movement. *Writing Spaces* combines peer-reviewed texts, composed for student writers, by teachers in the field, and arranged by topics student writers will immediately understand.

What help are we offering for students learning to write in the college environment?

- Understanding the shift from high school to college writing
- Strategies for group writing
- Defining and employing stages of the writing process
- Finding real help in writing through an engagement with rhetorical concepts, such as the rhetorical triangle, or genre, or principles of the canon, such as invention
- Coming to terms with plagiarism, how the academy defines it, and how to avoid common traps
- Appreciating the role of argument in the classroom, and constructively addressing fatigue with argumentation
- Why you should use "I" in your writing
- Metacognition and the necessary role of reflection in a robust revision process
- Strategies for recognizing the natural role of procrastination, and how to defeat it
- Realistic conceptions of online writing environments such as Wikipedia, and information on how to use such sites to further the goals of composition
- Creative strategies for generating writing ideas, including journaling, conversation (face-to-face and electronic), role play, drumming, movement, and handwriting

If you are struggling with a writing project, we think you will also appreciate the organization of *Writing Spaces*. Through the use of the keyword index on the website, you can quickly scan the table of contents to find chapters which help with your specific problems. Once a

writer clicks on a particular keyword, only the articles which address that specific problem appear; we will also have an expanded index in the print edition. This "just in time delivery" method for the help writers need not only provides clear help in the moment of composing confusion, but also places the concept in the context of several approaches from multiple articles so that when writers have the cognitive space to look at the writing concept in context, the keyword system gives them the ability to do just that.

But how else does this text differ from other composition texts geared for students? Let's start with free. Not only, as so many computer coders have said before, free like "beer" but free like "speech" (and maybe even free like a puppy, too) (cf. Wikipedia and Williams). Our text arrives to you free of charge, and freely available on the web. Thus, you can refer to it without limitation, through laptops and phones. And your teachers can assign it in your classroom without giving a second thought to whether or not it can be accessed, how much the bookstore will charge for it, and whether or not their prices will prevent or deter you from acquiring the text in a fall semester class until just before Thanksgiving. Nor will your teachers need to worry about sending the bookstore their readings for the fall semester before the prior February, as is a common practice on most campuses. Perhaps best of all, free means there is no need to for you to either rent the book or sell it back at the end of the semester for twenty-five cents on the dollar. And if you would prefer reading from the printed page, versions of this content will be for sale through Parlor Press.

Also, the content in this electronic volume evokes the "free as in speech" concept as well. This text is written largely by teachers of writing and donated free of charge to *Writing Spaces*. But because ours is a peer-reviewed publication, contributors can earn credit within the traditional tenure and promotion system. As students, you are ensured a quality of content which ranks as high as any in our field, and authors' content is evaluated for its veracity and utility in teaching writing— not whether it will sell.

This distinction between "gratis" and "libre" comes from the open source process in the computer coding world to describe a collaborative authoring process where the coding/writing product could be altered by the software user. But now we see how the open source process has expanded to fundamentally alter the textbook publishing model. As students, parents, and legislators have lately pointed out, the text-

book marketplace has long been broken: students must purchase texts required for courses, and the faculty who require those texts have no control over pricing. With the arrival of systems such as *Writing Spaces*, faculty can select peer-reviewed materials that students can either access for free on a website, or pay to print, and contributing authors are given academic credit for their original work.

Like many open source projects, *Writing Spaces* is just beginning. While even the most dedicated fan of *The Terminator* series would be hard pressed to think of "The Governator" as a progressive fomenter of equitable access to texts in higher education, there will no doubt be more and more government officials who see "free" and become acquainted with the open source publishing model. But you no longer need to wait to be told about the usefulness of open source textbooks in your writing classroom; you are reading it now. The fundamental shift toward a collaborative and responsive textbook publishing model has clearly begun in the world of composition. Thanks for being a part of it.

Works Cited

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