Writing in the Age of Technology: Plundering Art for Ideas about Writing

Cara Murray, The Graduate Center of CUNY

    This is a picture of the Web Design class that I worked in as a Writing Fellow[1] at Lehman College in the Bronx, New York. What we are doing is at the heart of all art classes; it is what art teachers call the "critique." In the two art classes that I worked with in the Fall of 2000 and the Spring

of 2001, Web Design and Life Drawing, the critique happened two to three times in the semester, and involved students evaluating other students' cumulative work in a public setting. All art classes use critique, from painting and sculpting to 3d imaging and computer animation. In the classes that I observed, the process of critique depended upon a sense of staging: there was a clear delineation between the work and the reception of the work, the work and the audience. I would argue that the critique is the performance center of art class, and as such it dramatizes the contours, borders and boundaries of art as a discipline. And I want to suggest that there is much to learn from this age-old performance. We can gain from crossing over the disciplinary divide and adapting learning techniques developed and perfected in Art to our own needs. Art is one of the few fields in which students are encouraged and, more importantly, trusted to master the material on their own, while they are shown how to form tight and long-lasting learning bonds with their fellow classmates. Critique facilitates both the sense of mastery and the community-building skills necessary for a continuation of life-long learning. In this paper, I will discuss the role of what I perceive to be the two most important pedagogical tools of the art class: critique and play. And I will suggest that we think about ways of incorporating more critique and more play into our writing classes.

Take one more look at the photo. Something about this picture does not belong. The smiling faces? No. The look of deep engagement with the material? No. Both are characteristic of critique. It is something else. Look at the edge of the photo; look at what is bleeding out of the frame. You see two bulbous computers; in fact, the room is full of computers. If you were in there, you would notice that each and every computer screen in the room displays the student-constructed web site that is the object of the critique. So what is wrong with the picture? For an entire semester, as I participated in the class and took part in critique, it never occurred to me that we didn't have to gather around one computer. Instead, we could comfortably sit in front of our own computer, as we perused the web site along with its author. That would have been far more comfortable, but for some reason, and it is not for the sake of the picture, we opted for the less convenient and more unreasonable way of viewing each other's work. We crammed into the north-west corner of the room, propping ourselves up against the wall, leaning over a desk, jockeying each other for space and a view. What dawned on me in my

last class as a Writing Fellow is the conundrum that this picture points to: why in the most technologically advanced class taught at Lehman were the professor and class joyfully flouting the most obvious benefit of technology, simultaneous exchange? Here students were designing their own web pages and fluently using HTML, Adobe Photoshop, Dreamweaver and Illustrator. And here they were participating in one of the most old-fashioned practices of all: grouping.

I have two hypotheses about why we "grouped": one has to do with community, the second has to do with movement, and together they tell us something about the nature of critique. Communities can be created in many ways, and I am not arguing that an on-line community is not a community. I am suggesting that critique needs community, and that Art recognizes that students' growth depends upon communal input into their work. I have seen critique done in three ways: the first is where one student is chosen to discuss another's work. All names are put into a hat, and from that hat a name is withdrawn. That student sits in front of the computer and navigates through the site of another student's, whose name is also drawn from the hat. She makes constructive comments about the student's work. In the picture, this is what is being done. The student directly in front is discussing the student to her right's work. Those gathered around her are listening to her critique. The second way that I've seen it done is that all students are expected to say something about the student's work, in a directed free-for-all. I think that this way is less productive, because not every student will talk, and it doesn't teach students the art of sustaining a critique over a period of time, as does the first option. In the process, a certain depth of critique is lost. And the third involves the professor critiquing the student's work, with everybody listening. This is my least favorite approach to critique because it only teaches the students how to listen to critique, if that. It doesn't give students practice in producing a critique.

Critique is like portfolio review with a twist. Portfolio review in art classes, as in writing classes, usually involves a closed-door, one-on-one review of the students' work from the point of view of the professor. Imagine portfolio review done publicly by and for the entire class, rather than privately by, and perhaps for, the professor. Critique often depends upon a body of work: in a design class, this means that a web site consisting of five or six web pages is reviewed. In a life drawing class this means that eight to ten pictures that represent a student's movement

throughout a period of the semester is reviewed. Reviewing a body of work focuses students' attention away from the grammar of a piece and away from a close textual analysis. Instead they are asked to recognize a broad body of work and develop a way of talking about work that goes beyond a close reading. It is important that this process be communal. Art already recognizes the conventional nature of critique, and that recognition is built into the process of critique. In other words, critique unveils criticism to be a conglomeration of socially constructed voices. If students can begin to see the constructed nature of critique, then they are more likely to feel licensed to participate in or invent their own forums for critique and consensus making.

Critique is something that is more easily done in art than in composition, and that is because artwork is more immediate in its appeal. It is readily read. If we were to do a critique of a student's written body of work, it would have to be incorporated as a homework assignment, rather than as simply an in-class activity. Over the Web, or on the blackboard, or in manuscript, students would have to read five or six works of another student and then comment upon that work in an open forum. Every student would have to do the reading to enforce the communal nature of the critique. If the class size is thirty students, then students must read about 150 works a piece. Is this viable? Are we willing to make room for this kind of activity? From what I've seen, art classes would be unimaginable without critique; how can we imagine critique happening in a composition class? This imagining process is worthwhile, for through critique, students learn to make judgments and detect the connection between making judgment and making work. They are taught that judgment at heart is communal.

Here is a model of critique that may work. The professor divides the classroom into distinct "critique communities" at the beginning of the term. If the class has thirty students, she could create six communities with five students each. The professor should have five targeted "critique community" writing assignments identified on the syllabus at the beginning of the semester. The "targeted" assignments would be spread throughout the semester: perhaps one in September, two in October, and two in November. For these assignments, students would have to turn in one copy to the professor, and one to each of their group members; thus each group member would be responsible for reading four other students' work once or twice a month. Needless to say, assignments should be short, two

pages in length, for this to work. For the following week, each student in a community would have to write a half-page narrative critical response to the four works that he received from his community members. All four of the reports would be copied and returned to the professor and to each member of the community. Students would also keep a copy for themselves, along with the writing that prompted the narrative response, so that each student would eventually accumulate five portfolios, her own and the four other members of her community, and five critique sets. All of this pre-work would be in preparation for the final critique, which would happen in the last month of the semester. Before this critique takes place, students would have had practice writing and reading critiques, and they would have developed a common body of knowledge within their communities. They would begin to see what it means to create and recognize a body of work. The final month of the class would be reserved for the staging of the critiques. In this staging, the class would be split into three groups, with two communities combined per class, so that one community would be in the know, and the other would not. The object of the critique would be for each student in each group to create a cohesive, interesting narrative that could appeal to both their own community, familiar with the student's work that is being critiqued, and to a wider audience, who is aware of the method but not familiar with the particular work. In other words, she would invent a narrative that would captivate a wider audience. The student performing the critique would have to read all five pieces again, but would have her accumulated responses to guide her through the process. Each student would critique only one other student's work, but would have had the opportunity to have written about four different writing styles throughout the semester. It is important in this final critique to stress its performative nature. This can be done by holding the critique in a different space: a hall, another classroom, a stage, a gym, an office. The student performing the critique should be encouraged to bring props: slides, overheads, home-made movie clips, PowerPoint displays, pointers, chalk, or just a stage voice, elevated style, or grandiose manner. But whatever they do, students must attempt to make others feel moved by their critiques.

When we think about community, we think about settlement, even stasis. But recently, travel theorists, such as James Clifford, have revealed the traveling nature of community. I want to dwell for a minute on critique, community and movement. Nothing is harder than to move around

in a room full of computers. They engulf the desk, leaving little room for a notebook. They weigh more than a small child and are more difficult to carry. In a classroom full of computers, the act of moving into a circle is impossible. Seeing the teacher is also impossible, as I learned when I sat in the back of the classroom and found myself shifting in my seat to glimpse the teacher. Seeing other students is nearly impossible. Thus, movement is as important to critique as is community.

For any movement to happen at all, we had to literally get up out of our seats and move, walking around whole rows of tables rather than through desks and chairs. In the life drawing class, the entire class got up out of their seats and moved into the hall. What was dramatized was that we were moving physically from one space, a large, open, classroom, to another, a hallway. It would have been much easier to stay. To make this move, students had to put down their charcoal, pens, and watercolors, wash their hands, and close their drawing pads. Outside in the hallway, students' works from the past five years or so decorated the walls. We seemed to be moving from a space of production to a space of critique. In the web design class, we moved from our anchored, individual work stations, to one that now was symbolically embodying the communal workspace, one that it would appear to us all work was moving through, even though all computers could potentially be the sites of all work. I want to suggest that we were acting out the movement from individualized space to communal space, and that this built-in performance is what critique dramatizes.

When I asked to take the picture in the art class, the professor said, "Take two." In the first picture, he said, "Let's all look serious." In the second picture, he said, "Ok, let's all look like we're having fun." Since for most people in the art class serious work was fun, the result is that the two pictures look about the same in terms of people smiling and laughing. I'd like to use this metaphor as a bridge to the second half of my paper. Critique itself works this way – it is not all seriousness as we think it is. And play, the second subject of my paper, is not all fun and games. In the life drawing class, this struck me. Play was ninety per cent of what went on in the class, and play was very serious. Each class was like the other: a nude model sat in the center and students encircling him or her drew. For four hours they drew, and as the pose varied, they varied their drawings. Students did nothing but draw. They drew and drew and drew. By the end of the class each student had produced as many as forty draw-

ings, and as few as five. One may ask, what did the teacher do? Absolutely nothing. As we all know from being children, the best play happened far from the supervision of our parents. Of course, the filial analogy invites anxiety. What is to prevent play from descending into a free-for-all? Play in art classes is bounded by clear and challenging goals. Can you draw this body without using outlines, starting from the center? Can you draw this body using only cylinders, triangles and ovals? Can you capture this gesture in a minute? Give an art student a specific goal, and he will become enraptured by that goal, continuously trying to perform up to his best ability, drawing until he has captured it, and then changing the goal, and starting the process all over again. Play is the lifeblood of art classes. Not much has changed in drawing pedagogy since the beginning of life drawing classes. Life drawing classes are simply about drawing, and rely completely on students' sense of play. A student without a sense of play doesn't learn.

What would happen if we were to conduct a writing class in the same way that life drawing classes were conducted? What would that look like? Perhaps we would place something in the middle of the room, a text, a flower arrangement, a nude student, and students would be asked to write about it. And write and write and write. Impossible. Again we fear the descent into free-for-all. They would chat, complain to somebody about their no-good teacher, eat, or go to the bathroom and never come back. What stands in the way of creating a classroom in which play is possible? Is it the students? No, these were the same Lehman students as appeared in my composition classes. Three of them were literally the same. Looking to add a component of writing to the class, I asked the professor if students could take a break from drawing to write. Aghast, he responded, "What? They'd have no preparation. Our students can't write without preparation. It scares them." I would suggest that what stands in their way is not their fear, but their underdeveloped sense of writing as play. And this is what I attempted to develop in these very competent drawing students. I built small, in-class writing assignments that mirrored their drawing exercises. After students had spent twenty minutes trying to capture the intricacies of a human skeleton that the professor had placed in the middle of the room, I asked them to write for seven minutes from the point of view of the skeleton, and to limit their writing to observations, but to use those observations and those observations alone to develop the skeleton as a character. Another time at the end

of class, I asked students to plunder their neighbor's collection of draw-ings from the day and choose a piece that they wished that they had drawn. From there I asked them to write about two of the foremost skills that the drawer needed to produce the piece. Once the professor had asked stu-dents to visit a Chinese calligraphy exhibit that was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and write a mid-term review of the show. Students came back from their visit mumbling complaints that "everything looked the same." Of course, they had no training in calligraphy, so it was difficult for them to distinguish one master's stroke, style, tone and gesture from the next. I began to develop writing assignments around calligraphy de-signed to have students play in writing with the characters. Once I asked them to choose one character, from a source of ten, and redraw it and then write a possible explanation for why it looked the way it did. I asked them to write its history. Then, I provided them with its history and asked them to revise. Another time I asked them to analyze three characters written in the script of three different masters, comparing and contrasting what they saw, and paying specific attention to the words that they used in writing about the characters. What I found is that the more strictly I defined the assignment, the more likely students rose to the challenge of "play." When the professor asked the students to write about Chinese Calligraphy, they were at sea, but when I asked for short, crisp pieces about one letter only, they were able to play with the object. By scrutiniz-ing it, turning it sideways and upside down and pairing it with a friend or an enemy, they were able to finally "see" a distinct style and voice and develop one of their own.

I want to close with an observation about play and critique that I made when I compared the two different web design courses in which I worked. In the first class, on a regular basis the teacher spent ten to twenty minutes explaining a concept or introducing a new technological task. She then allowed the class to play for the next hour and a half. Then she introduced a new concept or technology, then asked the class to play for another hour. In the second class, the teacher introduced three or four concepts during the first three hours of the class, and then asked students to play for the remaining hour. In the first class the attrition rate was lower than in the second class, beginning with twenty five students and ending with twenty three. The second class began with twenty-five and ended with thirteen. Theoretically, the teacher had covered more content in the second class—nearly twice as much; however, the final web sites

of the first class were no less technologically savvy. In the first class what happened during playtime is that students were playing alone and playing with others, using that time to move around, ask neighbors for help, and admire their work. In short, they were forging their own critical spaces. In the second class, they didn't play, they didn't move. When the teacher allowed open lab after three hours of lecturing, they gathered their coats and book bags and left. By mid-semester the second class dwindled to a near half its original size, and those who came to the class already techno-savvy left the class a little more so. The rest either produced un-sophisticated sites, paid their fellow-classmates to construct their sites, or dropped out.

When I suggested to the teacher of the second class that students should be encouraged to play more, he said: "But then I won't be able to cover as much material. They already have too much to learn in this class. They have to be proficient in technology and design here." I want to stress that students in the first class used technology in their projects that they were not taught by the teacher. I know that they used play time to ask students whose work they liked how they achieved certain effects. Because critique was a staple of the class, students knew that it was right to move around and use each other as resources. I learned from the two Art courses in which I acted as a Writing Fellow that critique and play work together, reinforcing learning techniques that will enable students to learn in and out of the classroom. But most importantly, I saw that what students learned in their art classes was to take joy in forging learning communities—a joy that would long out-last their four years within the University walls.

endnote:

1) In the Fall of 1999 the City University of New York implemented a program in which one hundred graduate students were hired and trained in WAC pedagogies. The Writing Fellows worked with professors on all CUNY campuses in all disciplines in order to help professors incorporate more writing and better writing assignments into their classes.