

# ‘Me/We’: Building an Embodied Writing Classroom for Socially Networked, Socially Distracted Basic Writers

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*ABSTRACT: This article addresses the premise that twenty-first century millennial students have difficulty forming personal relationship with teachers, classmates, and within learning communities partly because their attachments to online social networking sites distract them from being present to physical classroom spaces. As a result, academic proficiencies may suffer as engagement with peers and others is curtailed. The author discusses an approach to a writing classroom that seeks to bridge students' attraction to online social networking with more relational, face-to-face classroom encounters, building a pedagogy of the embodied classroom that, as Janet Emig argues, ensures students' personal development and community-building.*

*KEYWORDS: embodied learning; blogging; collaboration; online social networking communities; accountability groups; millennial learners*

*“The embodied classroom invites students to know themselves in ways only interaction with others can provide.”*

Janet Emig, “Embodied Learning” (2001)

In the past ten years, our students have been thrust toward membership in online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. According to Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith from the *PewResearch Internet Project*, users 18-29 years old make up 87% of the Facebook population, 37% of the Twitter population, and 53% of the Instagram population. While these social media spaces have created platforms for boundless networking opportunities, creative musings, and fellowshipping, they are also changing how people who occupy the same physical space interact with one another. More specifically, online networks are challenging classroom teachers to rethink how learning environments work for our networked students.

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According to Janet Emig, who predicted “technology’s inevitable dooming” fourteen years ago, composition teachers need to rethink how they will engage twenty-first century learners in a technology age that confuses the acquisition of information with the acquisition of knowledge. Although online social networks are attractive to many of us, students may have the tendency to “associate [their] computer screens and email accounts with [their] most profound experiences of community and connection” (Rushkoff 48), thus curtailing the opportunity to be in communion with real life others, which encourages a different kind of knowledge acquisition.

As critics have variably noted, participation in social media platforms may limit students’ social skills, decrease their (academic) writing ability, challenge their aptitude for concentration, and shrink their knowledge base—all the while broadening their social networks, increasing their writing habits, improving their ability to multitask, and expanding their information bank. Clearly, this technology age, which has tossed us into both a social networking frenzy and an information overload, has contributed to a smorgasbord of students who “know” everything and everybody and nothing and nobody at all. Exactly what are teachers to do but meet millennial students where they are, while providing them with a classroom community that invites them to fellowship with actual others—in human interaction where, says Emig, knowing happens?

In her 2001 essay, “Embodied Learning,” Emig claims that technology—particularly online distance learning communities—has the potential to prohibit twenty-first century learners from experiencing a traditional classroom environment where learning develops from interpersonal relationships. She argues that online distance learning communities will disrupt “our grounded, subtle, and complex knowledge, [because] the seductive simplicities of technological models [may] confuse the acquisition of information with the comprehension and creation of concepts” (273). In other words, similar to critics Douglas Rushkoff, Nicholas Carr, and Joseph Moxley, Emig suggests that the influx of information that the Internet and distanced communities provide users may be confused with knowledge, therefore creating a generation of students who mirror subjects of Paulo Freire’s banking model of education. Basically, says Freire in his 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, students engaged in a banking model of education are reduced to deposit boxes that merely receive information; they *know* very little about the information they have received (71-86). “Knowledge emerges only through . . . the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other,” says

Freire (72). In an effort to curtail the dire consequences of distance learning that Emig anticipated, she argues for an embodied learning environment.

Emig's embodied learning environment does not necessarily reflect the embodied learning pedagogies and/or environments discussed in the more recent literature, which include social activism (Ollis); physical disabilities (Gustafson; Standal); moving bodies (Barndt; Bresler; Crawford; Maivorsdotter and Lundvall); ecocomposition (Dobrin and Weisser); and present awareness (Fleckenstein; Stolz). While both Kristie S. Fleckenstein (1999) and Steven A. Stolz (whose 2014 article is also titled "Embodied Learning") argue, like Emig, a case for "organic anchoring in the material reality of flesh" (Fleckenstein 281), neither of the two directly responds to the millennial student whose knowledge about self and others is being altered as a result of online activities. Likewise, not much of the current discourse regarding embodied learning, which ranges from discussions of physical abilities and social activism to ecocomposition and the somatic mind, specifically explores the embodied classroom as possibly "one of the last sites for socialization available in our [techno-driven] society" (279, my inclusion)—which makes Emig's embodied classroom so vital to the humanity of our current students.

According to Emig, the embodied classroom is a space where actual bodies collaborate with one another "to acknowledge human complexity, situational ambiguity, vexed, even unanswerable questions about self and society" (279). It is a space, says Emig, that "reintroduces students to the joys and inevitability of human pace [where] learning . . . cannot be rushed or decreed" (280). In other words, Emig's embodied learning community, more or less, reflects a traditional learning environment where learning happens as a result of discoursing human agents, who are not online, but are sitting amongst one another, in a physical classroom. It is an educational philosophy grounded in theories as old as Socrates, Parker Palmer, and John Dewey and, indeed, supported by recent notions regarding ecocomposition, social activism, and the permeable mind and body.

Fortunately, while since 2001 there has been a surge in internet use, an increase in online games, applications, and communities, and an augmented demand for online courses and university programs, most students are still enrolled in physical classrooms that bear the potential for the Platonic Academy that Emig is apparently trying to salvage. In most universities, students still "transact with literal others in authentic communities of inquiry" (273), where learning happens. This is especially evident amongst historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as Steve Lamos has noted, as well

as liberal arts schools, whose missions, customs, and/or funding discourage a technology takeover.

While most university courses still function within the physical classroom model, the popularity of social media networks threatens the integrity of the classroom that Emig claims “asks us to introduce the customs and mores of collaboration and community” (279). Surely, Emig could not have predicted the invasion of online social networks. Yet when she contends, “[O]ne of the great ironies here is that to work in seeming isolation within a technological universe requires ultimately working collectively” (279-80), and asks, “What can we offer learners who live in a technological era?” (277) the answer emerges: “an embodied classroom,” but one supported by an online social community. For, says Stephanie Vie, “[I]nstructors and institutions in the late age of print need to rise to the challenge presented by students’ increased participation in online spaces” (10).

In “Digital Divide 2.0 ‘Generation M’ and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom” (2008), Vie argues that while students are heavily engaged in online social media, their critical digital literacy is not advancing. Just as Emig concludes in her essay, Vie claims that twenty-first century teachers should reexamine their pedagogical practices, rethink their classroom materials, and revise their learning environments to meet the current needs and demands of our tech-savvy, millennial students. While inviting resources and materials with which millennial students are already familiar into a traditional classroom setting may promote student engagement and increase student comprehension, teachers, too, must be careful not to simply replace one new pedagogical method for another. Simply creating an online distanced learning environment within a traditional classroom setting, however, would be counterproductive to ensuring our students are developing knowledge versus simply receiving information—both teachers and students would benefit from reinventing, if you will, the traditional embodied learning environment that is supported by an online community with which students are already familiar.

The reasons that many of our millennial students struggle with initiating and engaging the classroom community are complex. However, I am inclined to believe that much of their angst about forging relationships with “real life” others in the classroom is a result of their online participation. According to Emig, “Perhaps, because of the time spent in cyber rather than embodied space, users like our students may begin to prefer the virtual over the actual . . . or they may suffer from the ultimate confusion: not being able to discern the difference between the two” (277). Academically, most of our

students surf the Net for information; socially, they send friend requests in order to build their circles. Both activities—which make up a large part of their human behavior—require they engage a distanced community. More often than not, student communities exist amongst the hundreds and thousands of “friends” with whom they share Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. But because students’ active membership to online communities requires their clinging to the technologies through which these distant communities are accessed, students are more likely to carry computer tablets than textbooks, reach for smartphones rather than pen and paper, and wear headphones instead of “thinking caps.” The popularity of the Internet and its social media networks has encouraged a generation of students whose immediate community seldom exists amongst their peers and teachers with whom they share actual classroom space. Thus, teachers often enter into silent spaces in their classrooms, where students are not discussing the latest reading, reviewing last night’s homework, or even gossiping about the latest reality television program, but are sitting there, “alone”—distracted and reaching for a sense of belonging via texts, tweets, selfies and Facebook updates.

Inevitably, with digital devices in hand, ear, or face, many students disconnect themselves, perhaps unintentionally, from real-world (or real time) experiences—accessible in the embodied classroom—as they stay joined to online communities. Unfortunately, says Douglas Rushkoff, “By using a dislocating technology for local connection, [students] lose [their] sense of place, as well as [their] home field advantage” (41). In other words, many millennial students use dislocating technologies that prohibit them from being fully present to the now that grounds people to the reality that fosters relationships. “Digitized” students become decentralized students. As a result, students’ classroom proficiencies stand to suffer, for, as Emig maintains and other researchers have echoed (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj; McKeachie and Svinicki; Palmer; and Schoeberlein), classroom collaborations with real-life others are essential to ensuring meaningful learning experiences.

If our classrooms are to reflect the real world experiences we’d like our students to have, we must create a learning environment that supports their mind-body-soul selves—while inviting in the best of what online writing and social opportunities have to offer. Therefore, since fostering classroom relationships is vital to student learning, and students more readily engage the learning process when its practices are supported by resources with which they are familiar and interested, I believed creating an embodied classroom supported by an online social network would benefit the *Improving Writing*

2300 course I teach at Florida A&M University, a public historically black university. Even more, such pedagogy would be especially apt because *Improving Writing 2300* is a writing course for students who earn a C or better in *Freshman Communicative Skills I* and *II* but still need extra time to work on their writing. Most of these sophomore and junior students major in the social sciences; however, English majors are required to take the course as a measure of additional support before taking *Advanced Composition 3320*.

## **SOME BASICS OF THE EMBODIED LEARNING CLASSROOM**

In 1975, Muhammad Ali delivered a Harvard Graduation Commencement Address in which he recited what is considered the shortest poem in American history. “Me, We,” he said. Like Ali, I don’t believe there is a greater commitment human beings have to themselves and other sentient beings, human and non-human, than to foster relationships that ensure compassion, understanding, and love—all of which are grounded in truth. For a community of truth—often advocated for by civil rights leaders, educational philosophers, and politicians—requires a shared vulnerability that makes possible the peace we imagine. Therefore, as a classroom teacher who believes that students’ classroom experiences should mimic the “real world” experiences I would like them to have, I endeavor to “create a space where the community of truth is practiced” (Palmer xiii). I particularly believe that the liberal arts, such as the writing classes I teach, are especially responsible for ensuring our students are reminded of their humanity via reading and writing practices.

According to Parker Palmer, whose philosophies support Emig’s notion of embodied learning, “Knowing is a profoundly communal act, [and] . . . [n]othing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature” (xv). In *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*, Palmer claims, “the pain that permeates education [is] ‘the pain of disconnection’” (x). He suggests that creating a classroom “‘community of truth’” where students and teachers collaborate with one another—where they “‘must speak and listen, make claims on others, and make [one another] accountable’” (xii)—is a practice in “*knowing, teaching, and learning*” (xii, emphasis in the original). It, too, becomes a practice in loving, for “to know as we are known” requires both students and teachers to form relationships with one another in a vulnerable fashion that conjures self-reflection, compassion, inquiry, and creativity. Therefore, in order to situate my *Improving Writing* students in an embodied learning environment

that I thought would help them to develop meaningful relationships, I took two measures: I decided to personally engage with my students and form accountability groups among them.

### **Engaging Students and Teacher Self-Revelation**

During a teacher training I attended some years ago, my director suggested that novice teachers should enter the classroom sternly. She actually claimed that my peers and I would be able to manage the classroom more effectively if we began the semester with a no-nonsense attitude. Don't smile, don't share personal information, and don't become friends with your students, she said. In other words, maintain a safe distance from our students, and we will be fine. Be objective. However, most good teachers do not build such thick walls between students and themselves. Teaching practitioners and theorists, including bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Palmer, have revealed how important building relationships with students is to their learning development. According to hooks, who borrows much from both Freire and Palmer to undergird her own pedagogical theories, "[T]he professor must *genuinely* value everyone's presence. There must be an on-going recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources," she says. "Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community" (emphasis in the original, 8). In essence, as teachers engage their students as actual human beings, they illustrate a love that invites them all into community.

Although Freire, hooks, and Palmer do not use the term "embodied learning" in their pedagogical theories, they each advocate for an embodied classroom where student relationships among themselves and others ground their learning experiences both in and outside of the classroom. "[T]he way we relate to each other and our subject reflects and shapes the way we conduct our relationships in the world," says Palmer (89). Therefore, if one of my teacherly goals is to position the classroom in the real life situation that it actually is, thus allowing students a mind-body-soul learning experience, then I must engage students in a relationship that transcends the traditional teacher-student hierarchy.

And so, I have not held on to my director's advice, for not only has research taught me differently, but my own experience as both a former high school teacher and a student myself has taught me that the best teachers do smile and share some personal information with their students in an effort

to create relationships with them. Additionally, says Deborah Schoeberlein, “Academic performance improves when students feel safe and connected—in short, when they are supported by a strong relationship with their teacher” (71). How can I expect students to trust my directions and engage in classroom discussion if they don’t see me as a human being who thinks *and* feels and who cares about their personhood? According to hooks, “Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share, are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive” (21). I know that because I have a doctorate degree, am responsible for accessing students, and am some years older than they, my students may feel that these hierarchies obligate them to share themselves with me; they *must* do what the “all-knowing, all-powerful” professor tells them. Therefore, because the hierarchical nature of higher education tends to promote exercises of coercive power, I shared just as much of myself with my *Improving Writing* students as I asked them to share; I began on the first day of class.

Student introductions are standard during the first week of classes. Therefore, the first day that I met with my *Improving Writing* students, I asked them to stand up and give one another brief introductions of themselves including their majors, hometown, and desired careers. However, instead of leaving students to recite their demographics, I led each of them into a dialogue with me and their peers. At any point that students shared information that I had in common with them, I noted the commonality, asked questions about their experiences, and laughed with them. Eventually other students participated in the banter and we ultimately were engaged in a lively discussion based on these introductions.

Participating in classroom introductions laid the foundation for the embodied classroom. During first day class introductions, I discovered that some of my students lived in the neighborhood where I grew up, a few attended the same high school as I did, and others enjoyed the same music I did. As I actively listened to each student, which included welcoming each student by name after he or she provided it, I offered students an attentiveness that assured them that they mattered. “Names can serve as proxies for flesh-and-blood students . . . or they can convey respect and recognition by acknowledging another facet of a person’s identity,” says Schoeberlein. “The way you say a student’s name can confer welcome and attention or dismissal—literally and figuratively” (55). These class introductions alone grounded students and me in mutual respect. Since understanding and compassion come directly from respect, a foundation for truth was immediately being cultivated during class introductions.



In other words, when one practices understanding and compassion, she exhibits respect for others that promotes love. In loving spaces, students are able to embody a truth free of judgment and criticism. In truth, human beings are given permission to be themselves, wholeheartedly. When teachers give students permission to be themselves, they assist students in reclaiming their humanity. Calling students by their names and remembering them foster the respect that invites students into truth with their professors. Such agency cultivates an awareness that acknowledges—as Maya Angelou claims in her poem “Human Family”—“we are more alike . . . than we are unlike.” Eventually, introductions segued into a classroom dialogue that further allowed us to know one another. My students and I connected, for we “embodied” similar at-home situations that were reflected in our regional vernacular, attire, and body language.

During these informal dialogues, I also spoke to my students—who are predominantly Black—in what James Baldwin calls “Black English,” because I believed it would reinforce our connections with one another. People find community—a sense of belonging—in the shared languages that they embody. Since I aimed to forge a classroom community, I had to speak in a language that invited students into the community. As a rhetoric and composition scholar, I also draw on my style of dress, my body language, and my demeanor as an aspect of my language and communication with students. Undoubtedly, being a (young) Black professor helped me create community in my class, for my Black students and I encountered little to no problems connecting because we shared similar cultural (popular, religious, and Black) experiences.

Talking with students in a common language definitely enhanced my relationship with them. Speaking in a language that is ordinary and innate to my Black students seemingly relaxed them into an academic space that often excludes those who do not speak the language—a notion that hooks examines in her 1990 essay, “Postmodern Blackness.” I discovered, for instance, that engaging in conversations about hometowns—or what my students call “crib”—in a way that reflected their personhood allowed them to further trust the classroom community, because they felt akin to me, their professor. As a result, they talked more openly and honestly about their personal experiences, because they believed I related to them; I cared. And truthfully, while I helped students to comply with the standards of American English via their writing skills, I spoke in Black English the majority of class time. My students are Black, and I wanted them to thoroughly comprehend classroom objectives and expectations. Therefore, my job as *professor* is to speak in a language that promotes understanding.

In addition to sharing personal information by way of class introductions, I shared myself with my students through the same writing assignments that I required of them. While I did not write weekly with them, I did engage in freewriting and blogging exercises with them that required personal reflections, as I will discuss later. Engaging with students promoted the embodied classroom, for it encouraged me to become more of an engaged classroom member versus classroom teacher.

During one class meeting, for instance, I was able to secure a computer lab for student use. In the short time we were allotted (50 minutes), I required students to free write online on the topic, “Describe Your God.” This subject evolved from a previous discussion the class had had on religion—a discussion, I have realized, that always concludes with my Black students believing I am atheist. Nevertheless, instead of watching students free write, which distances me from the classroom experience, I situated myself into the classroom *body* and freely wrote with students. It was such a riveting experience!

As I wrote with them, I found myself eyeing the clock, because I didn’t want to run out of time. I was anxious about my sentence structure and use of mechanics, spelling, and punctuation. I wanted to sound profound—like a philosopher. And I wanted to tell (via blogging) my student readers that I wasn’t an atheist. I cared about their judgments of me. Additionally (and perhaps sadly), I wanted to show off. I wanted to integrate literature that supported my ideas, and I wanted to write poetically. As I was writing, and simultaneously thinking about all of my writing desires, I imagined my students experiencing similar anxieties. What a stressful way to be. Placing myself in the students’ position awakened my compassion and patience for them, which, of course, reinforced the classroom community. By situating myself as member of the class, I identified with students, which developed the “relationshiping” that anchors community.

Moreover, during a few class meetings, students watched me perform the same writing tasks that were required of them, heard me read through my expressed insecurities, and observed the edits, revisions, and proofreading marks I made on my own work. As an engaged teacher, I removed myself from the head of the class into the classroom *body* and students watched me *embody* their role as student; as their “peer,” students were more inclined to comment on my writing, and they did.

And while students respected my role as professor, they absolutely appreciated the opportunity to “school” me. For instance, students freely commented on my blog post about God, which was a humbling experience. Receiving feedback for any writing that I share with others is absolutely

daunting, for my work is a reflection of my personhood. Reading criticisms always feels like a spiritual assault. So imagine the fear I felt about receiving feedback from students (who also use Rate My Professor). Allowing them to access my thoughts via the blogs I wrote with them made me just as vulnerable to my students as they have been to me. Such vulnerability, which can be practiced only in a compassionate space, grounded us in a community of truth, where we each were fully present to one another. Experiencing that kind of vulnerability and anxiety regarding my students' comments reminded me of the fear and upset that my students often experience when I return their papers to them. Nevertheless, with a courage that my students muster every week, I read each student's comments.

One of my students found my ideas humorous. His entire blog response is worth quoting here.<sup>1</sup> He wrote:

I find it comical that you think that the class believes God is some sort of fairy-like creature that sings with the doves and dances with the cherubs. As comical as it is, I think that you would be hard-pressed to find an individual (at least in our class) that thinks this way. Reflecting on my peers, I honestly can't see the majority of them believing that he is white either. It's interesting that you believe that "Our God" and "Your God" are two completely separate entities. God is the universe. God is love. God is a being. He does live outside of us. However, He also lives within the hearts of all who believe. However, God also gave us free will. We can believe in whatever we want and I respect your beliefs. So, now that the sermon's over, how was your Thanksgiving? I hope all is well with you and your loved ones. God Bless.

This particular student's comment to my blog is courageous. Not often do students challenge their professor's ideas the way this student challenges mine. He not only labels my thoughts "comical," but he affirms his right to believe what he wants. He also claims to know his classmates well enough to speak on their behalves. Finally, he concludes his response sarcastically—"God Bless." Undoubtedly, the relationships that our embodied classroom helped to create encouraged this student's agency. Usually a quiet student, he trusted that he could boldly respond to my thoughts without reprimand. Blogging allowed him the space to speak so freely. The embodied classroom cultivated the trust he needed to do so, and invited his peers to do the same. Once students entered into relationship with me, I reinforced their relationships with each other in what I call "accountability groups."

## **Forming Accountability Groups**

At about the second week of class—at which time student class schedules are fixed—I assembled students in groups of three to four. I organized the accountability groups myself for two reasons: First, I organized students by alphabetical order of their last names, because doing so helped me to quickly memorize student names. Knowing and calling students by their names reinforced the sense of belonging that I want students to feel; it also grounded them into the classroom experience (Schoeberlien 55). Second, I organized the accountability groups myself in order to curtail the unintentional “othering” that often occurs when students choose their own groups. In other words, when left to their own devices, some students gravitate to those who look cool, while others link to their same genders, and the few students who are already familiar with one another stay connected—prohibiting their opportunity to meet new students. As a result of students’ self grouping, more often than not, two to four students are left un-chosen, which encourages inferiority and fragmentation. Although those “othered” students usually form their own group, collectively—albeit unintentionally—they become “outsiders.”

I called these student clusters “accountability groups” because, unlike other class collaborations that require students to complete group projects together, accountability groups require students to simply be responsible to one another. In other words, students used their accountability groups to keep one another informed about class assignments, to submit assignments on behalf of absent students, to help one another complete assignments, and to participate in peer review exercises; however, they did not have to rely on one another for grades.

While earning grades based on group projects has the potential to prepare students for the collaborations that they will confront outside of school, I have encountered classrooms that become fragmented because of group grading. In fact, in previous writing courses I have taught, some students actually withdrew from the course when they discovered some of their grades would rely on peer collaborations. Unfortunately, many students fall susceptible to the notion of a dog-eat-dog world and would rather fend for themselves than collaborate with others. But accountability groups relaxed students into a classroom community, for students did not have to perform the tasks of disciplining teacher—which many of them are neither confident nor mature enough to do. Accountability groups detached students from the stigma that is often placed on group work, and as a result, they didn’t enter their groups defensively.

Moreover, after *Improving Writing* students were placed in their accountability groups, I still had to encourage them to physically move into intimate clusters to talk with one another and retrieve each other's contact information. Surprisingly, and unfortunately, although I initiated student grouping, students moved into a group, but they just sat there in each other's faces staring into space, waiting for me to tell them what to do next. Machines. So, I actually facilitated their peer discussions by offering them questions (*What did you do this weekend? What other classes are you taking?*) to pose to one another. Additionally, I moved around the room, often sitting on students' desks and chit chatting with individual groups, which reinforced the relationship I continued to forge with students. (Although I do not care for icebreakers, in an effort to assist students in their getting acquainted with one another as well as with the teacher, an icebreaking activity may prove helpful here.) Finally, before class ended, I reminded students to use their smartphone apps (Google Hangouts, GroupMe, Skype) as spaces for touching base with one another. Surprisingly, more often than not, while students carry smartphones, many of them fail to connect their mobile devices and their capabilities to academic settings.

Many students used Group Me, a smartphone application that allows users to form group text messaging forums to keep in contact with one another. In these forums, students informed each other of their absences and possible tardiness, which were relayed to me when I took attendance. They also scheduled out of class study groups with one another. I discovered, too, that these accountability groups encouraged students to share their text books, by way of scanning or photocopying chapter pages, with students who did not have the finances to purchase their text books in a timely fashion. Some students even shared their access codes to their e-books in order to ensure their classmates were prepared.

Student accountability groups undoubtedly developed the embodied classroom community I endeavored to help students foster, which in turn made learning more meaningful and accessible. With accountability group members, students engaged in peer review tasks. They also helped one another to understand and accomplish the course's technology requirements. Although I required students to move into their accountability groups to accomplish these tasks, I observed the classroom community that these groups helped to develop. While students were in their accountability groups, none of them were distracted or displaced by their cell phones where they seek access to their distant online communities. Instead, they were engaged in their local classroom community, where they collaborated with one another other.

Students were totally present to the classroom situation—an attentiveness and desire that accountability groups absolutely helped to foster. Members of the class talked, laughed, and listened to one another. We were able to have heated discussions without becoming angry with each other and without any one person dominating the conversation. Additionally, students deferred to their group members if they needed support during class discussions. Sometimes, students would even take up for slacking classmates claiming I should consider students' out-side-of-class situations. I remember a student, riffing on our university name, professing to me and her classmates, "We are a FAMUly."

I know had I not created accountability groups, students would not have forged the classroom community we were currently engaging. The classroom would have been a fragmented one where the same two or three students freely participate in class discussions, where the majority of students do not know their classmates well enough to seek their assistance, and where the general classroom would be void of the enthusiasm (spirit) needed to cultivate a meaningful learning experience. Because many students belong to social network communities, they do not have to commit themselves to belonging to a classroom community. They can (and often do) distract themselves from their feelings of loneliness and isolation by absorbing themselves in a distant community of "friends" and "followers." Unfortunately, an unbalanced belonging to these distant communities can distract students from collaborating with classmates and teachers in real time. If students do not feel connected to a community, what would encourage them to participate in that community? Eventually, teachers will experience increased student tardiness and absenteeism, for student disconnection leads to a lack of care and commitment.

Moreover, student accountability groups helped to create student friendships. As students became situated into their accountability groups, many of them rearranged their classroom seats to sit near group members. Their classroom togetherness also transferred outside of class, as members claimed to have formed local study groups as well as attended University-sponsored events together. Additionally, many of the students collaborated with one another to attend the required semester's off-campus film viewing. Surely, the relationships that students forged in the classroom informed how they responded to one another outside of class. Although my using the term "friendship" may be presumptuous, there is no doubt that students trusted and respected one another enough to engage in a sense of community outside of the structured classroom community.

As the semester progressed and my students and I continued to practice classroom community by working together in a physical space where we engaged traditional writing tasks, peer review exercises, class discussions, and student presentations, I eventually integrated WordPress into our weekly tasks. I did this for two reasons: 1) WordPress is an online content management system whose inclusion in the course syllabus modernizes required departmental course objectives that do not oblige students to integrate social media into their writing practices; and 2) it is an online social community network that I believed would support the embodied classroom to which my millennial students belonged. Integrating such technology into the traditional embodied learning community responded to Emig's question: "What can we offer learners who live in a technological era?" (277); fulfilled Palmer's request to: "[B]ring students into living communion with the subjects [teachers] teach" (xvii); and considered Vie's challenge to address students' increased participation in online writing spaces (10). The discussion that follows details how I integrated WordPress—particularly blogging practice—into the *Improving Writing* course and how it supported the embodied classroom.

## **SUPPORTING THE EMBODIED CLASSROOM WITH AN ONLINE SOCIAL COMMUNITY**

Although computer technologies may distract both students and teachers from being present to the physical bodies that populate the classroom, we also know their potential to actuate the new, interactive twenty-first century classroom (Ferdig and Trammell; Goodwin-Jones; Krause; and Miller and Shepherd). Surely, students can engage in online "whole group peer-review sessions" that encourage collaboration (Bush), and they can participate in other learning communities via online tutoring sessions (Coogan). Further, they can develop their embodied relationships by way of online learning communities they share with one another. However, students still need practice in transferring and balancing their online collaborations with "real-life" actualized spaces. After all, say both Emig and Palmer, the classroom should reflect the "real" world experiences our students (will) engage. And, in this current technological era, the "real" world includes student participation in both cyber and physical spaces.

While technology use in composition classrooms dates back to the early 1960s (Daigon; Engstrom and Whittaker; Fisher and Kaess; and Page and Paulus), our current technological age in particular encourages distance

and dislocation. If the contemporary classroom teaches students how to balance their online engagements with the significance of local communities, then students will have more meaningful classroom experiences—ones that are grounded in intimate collaborations where creativity, inquiry, and compassion are practiced with real life human beings. With hope, what students learn in their classrooms will eventually transfer into their out of class experiences. And so, whether we want to or not, teachers must tend to students' attachment to communication technologies to ensure that students have meaningful classroom experiences that they can carry with them beyond the classroom, thus bringing us closer to the peace we imagine.

As a child, I often wrote letters to my teachers and parents that expressed emotions, posed inquiries, and exposed insecurities. I was often afraid to verbally render my frailties, but writing them down on paper offered me the courage to speak—particularly of those thoughts and ideas that affirmed my personhood and allowed me to (safely) practice agency. Fortunately, my parents and teachers either wrote me back, or they verbally responded to my letters gently and compassionately. Those written exchanges, unbeknownst to me then, supported the embodied relationship that we were already engaging. Their responses to my letters made me aware that they were listening—that my thoughts and ideas mattered. In turn, as I got older, I became more confident in myself, and I felt more situated—courageous and secure—in the embodied relationship we already shared. With the advent of technology, however, computers and smartphones have replaced pen and paper, and as a result of these technologies' ability to provide its users instantaneous gratification, some researchers (Angelone; Scruton; and Warrell) argue that communicating via technological devices is “hiding behind the wall of technology.” “Our digital tools play to our vanity and vulnerability,” says *Forbes* columnist Margie Warrell. “We can easily become seduced by them, relying on them for affirmation, validation and a sense of belonging” (Warrell, Margie).

I absolutely believe, as Warrell writes in her blog post, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?: Why We Mustn't Hide Behind Technology,” “[A]s we have built expansive social networks online, the depth and breadth of our networks offline has diminished.” However, I also know, as research suggests (Bryant; Eyman; Miller and Shepherd; and Stefanone and Jang), that online communities *can* support real-life relationships. Surely, just as traditional “pen palling” supported the intimate relationships I was already having with my parents and teachers, writing in online spaces could offer students the provisions (courage, safety, agency) they need to forge intimate relation-



ships with actual others. If teachers like myself understand writing practice as an exercise in developing student agency, then the twenty-first century technology-driven student can find relief in using computer technologies as tools for embodied community building. The distance that technology forges creates a safe space for student self-exposure. Onliners are usually more courageous risk-takers in virtual spaces than they are in actualized real-life environments. And despite some of the oppositions regarding online communities, not all online users are using computer screens to be confrontational, violent, and/or fraudulent. Many are simply products of their time and have become more comfortable participating in online social networks than face to face.

Because our students are using Facebook and Twitter as platforms for written confession, self-expression, and community building, as well as for marketing and professional networking, it is vital that composition classrooms teach students how to use these technologies to support and develop the embodied relationships that are often neglected as a result of users' attachments to technology. With that said, I figured blogging—which is a practice that many composition scholars and teachers (Santos and Leahy; Tougaw; and Zhang) have integrated into their writing classrooms in order to engage twenty-first century students in current writing practices—would be a significant addition to the traditional embodied classroom. It would especially be beneficial to the African American students to whom I teach *Improving Writing*.

African American students statistically belong to more social networks than their White counterparts; they also lead their White counterparts in smartphone usage (Duggan and Brenner). Unfortunately, however, African American students continue to trail White students in their ability to use technology for academic and professional growth (Blackmon 153-66). Their disadvantages can be contributed to several forces, including the fact that HBCU classrooms rarely have the computer technologies (Roach; Snipes, Ellis, and Thomas; Stewart; and Stuart) that enable students and teachers to approach writing practice beyond the traditional computer requirements (Blackboard, Word Processing, and e-mail).

To an extent, this is true at my campus: although my HBCU has several computer labs across campus, the Department of English doesn't have its own. Limited access to computer technologies therefore encourages a traditional classroom approach, void of pedagogies that include technology instruction. And so, for many of the Black students I encounter, computer technologies are a fashionable accessory that promotes "swag." Therefore, in

an effort to assist Black students in doing more than consuming technology, integrating it into the traditional *Improving Writing* course I teach assisted them in being producers of the technology they use, while enhancing the embodied classroom in which they were already engaged.

### **“Improving Writing” with WordPress**

The *Improving Writing* course I teach is one of three elective writing courses from which students can choose to fulfill their curriculum requirements; the other two are *Creative Writing* and *Advanced Composition*. Most non-English majoring students (Criminal Justice, Sociology, and Education) opt to take the *Improving Writing* course, which has garnered the reputation of being the most remedial writing class of the three elective writing courses. However, students must have earned a C or better in their first year composition courses before taking the class and are expected to write business/professional documents, write film reviews, and read and respond to contemporary texts/issues—writing activities that are advanced even for many successful freshman writers.

Because the course has been stigmatized, many students enter *Improving Writing* believing it is a less demanding course than the other writing courses the University offers. However, the WordPress component that I included in the course challenged writing students to pay careful attention to voice, structure, audience, and mechanics—an endeavor that caused writing to “get real.” Since WordPress publicizes student work to an audience beyond the classroom, students were often encouraged to be more mindful writers.

WordPress, which is a content management system, is perhaps the most practical computer technology to use in my *Improving Writing* course, for it allowed my students to create a website, which I called their “online employment portfolio.” Essentially, the online content that made up student e-portfolios came from the required course units. Students created four web pages: “About Me” (elevator speech assignment); “Personal Philosophy” (personal statement assignment); “Resume”; and “Blogs” (reader response assignments, including required film review). Students practiced grammar and mechanics via their editing, proofreading, and revising tasks. Unless students were majoring in computer science, the majority of them created a website for the first time when they took *Improving Writing* with me. Likewise, the majority of them blogged (beyond microblogs) for the first time, too.

## **Belonging to an Online Social Community**

In addition to serving as a content management system that allowed students to maintain an e-portfolio, WordPress includes a blogging feature that invited students into an online social community with which they were already familiar. WordPress users can comment on other blogs, follow each other, and re-blog other posts. Additionally, like most social media networks, WordPress allows users to add tags to their posts and to link their WordPress accounts to their other social media networks in order to increase their visibility amongst their followers and their followers' followers. And so, once students created and added required content to their "About Me," "Personal Philosophy," and "Resume" pages, they were tasked to engage in blogging exercises that reinforced their embodied learning environment; those writing tasks were posted to their "Blog" page.

I provided students their blog topics. Topics included: "Describe Your FAMU Experience"; "What/Who Interested You in Your Current Career Choice?"; "Describe The Person You Admire in Your Career Field"; "What Does Your Name Mean?"; and the previously discussed topic, "Describe Your God." Students also composed and voted on three other topics, which included "Describe Your Favorite Song," "Freewrite on Anything," and "Evaluate Your Semester." Their film review was also written as a blog post, and it required students to see and examine George Tillman's *The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete* (2013).

Instead of engaging contemporary readings, which the *Improving Writing* course requires, I encouraged students to engage themselves, which I believe is vital to building relationships with other people. As composition research has already showcased for years (Brand; Elbow; and Macrorie), personal writing assignments provide basic writing students a sense of agency that more formal academic writing does not. As a result, students often write more, and they write more truthfully. Therefore, since blogging is a form of online journaling, students were allowed and encouraged to approach the blogging situation as a practice in journaling. They had the freedom to relax in their own voices, which encouraged an authenticity in student composition that was easier for students to write and often times more pleasurable for their peers and me to read. Moreover, although students were encouraged to blog in their authentic voices, they were also reminded that their WordPress audience included a hypothetical employer, as well as their classmates and other social media followers.

Students blogged once a week on Fridays. Since our class was not housed in a computer lab, students did not convene for class during blogging days. Instead, they were given the opportunity to use class time to blog and the weekend to proofread, revise, and comment on each other's blog posts. All blogs were both posted on WordPress and hand submitted to me so that students could receive comments that would help them to improve their writing. They also were required to comment on their group members' posts via WordPress's commenting options, and occasionally, students were required to read their blogs out loud to their classmates.

Blogging with WordPress encouraged the embodied classroom community, which then influenced students' class participation. Out of the twenty students who populated the class (and were surveyed about their semester experiences), only one student noted not feeling like he/she belonged to a classroom community as a result of blogging exercises. According to this student, "[Blogging] still felt as if it was a class assignment." In other words, blogging did not inspire this student to participate in classroom happenings more than any other traditional writing assignment. This student's sentiment supports Jill Walker's notion that forcing students to blog may not be empowering at all (*jilltxt.net*).

On the contrary, much research (Brindley; Hrastinski and Naghmeh; Solimeno; and Tharp) supports the notion that online communities *do* provide students with a sense of embodied classroom community. According to Galloway, Greaves, and Castan, "While the internet and its tools are not a panacea for the woes of the academy, they do afford a range of opportunities for a more engaged scholarly community" (187). In their "Interconnectedness, Multiplexity and the Global Student: The Role of Blogging and Micro Blogging in Opening Students' Horizons," the authors claim, "[S]ocial media platforms can be used creatively to supplement conventional educational practice to generate collaborative communications beyond the limitations of physical classes or traditional printed media" (187-88). My *Improving Writing* students agreed, concluding that blogging *did* encourage classroom community, for they were able to deeply engage their classmates online, which promoted their in-class engagement with one another other.

WordPress's commenting feature further inspired the embodied classroom, for it encouraged student agency. Once students obtained a sense of agency, the act of writing and sharing became more desirable. Student users freely commented on their peers' blog submissions, further developing their online collaborations and eventually enhancing their classroom community.

WordPress's commenting feature offered students feedback that transcended teacher responses.

More specifically, as part of their writing requirements, students had to read and give written feedback on more than two of their classmates' blogs—a practice that is not accessible in the traditional pen and paper classroom. Students were not permitted to comment on each other's spelling, sentence structure, and the like. Allowing them to do that would have placed them in a teacherly role, which could have possibly created a wedge in the peer relationships they were forging. Instead, students responded to each other's sentiments, which validated their feelings, ideas, and personhood, and eventually connected them to one another as human beings. Writing (blogging), then, became a practice in securing one's place in the classroom and understanding one's self in relationship to others. It provided students with a sense of agency.

One student claimed that the ability to comment and respond to peers made him or her "feel connected to them as a whole." Another student agreed, noting student responses to blogs allowed him or her to see the commonalities that students shared. "Knowing your classmates can relate to you is an amazing thing," said this participant. A different student added, "I think that [blogging] did make me feel [connected]. It was cool to see other students that I hadn't previously interacted with in class comment on my posts." "[Blogging] provided an atmosphere that connected our ideas and thoughts," said one more student.<sup>2</sup>

While students verbalized their belonging to a classroom community, their belonging was illustrated in their interaction with one another as well as with me. At the start of the semester students did not know each other and had not independently attempted to relate to one another—which contributed to a lonely, fragmented classroom. My teaching experiences have taught me that classrooms void of student and student-teacher relationships often result in boredom, low participation, and decreased attendance. However, by mid semester, each student came to class prepared mind, body, and soul, and most students were already seated in the classroom engaged in various discourses once I entered the space.

Because blogging supported classroom community, I found that most students also became more inclined to successfully complete their writing tasks—perhaps because they were interested in receiving their classmates' comments. In addition, occasionally I would ask students to read their posts out loud to their classmates, which also ensured completed writing tasks, for a student who failed to complete her assignment would inadvertently

disappoint her peers with whom she was fostering a sense of belonging. “Knowing that your teammates are depending on you increases the likelihood of your doing your work,” says McKeachie and Svinicki (218). And so, as the embodied classroom developed, so did students’ sense of academic responsibility.

I have realized that blogging exercises—although an online practice—secured an embodied classroom, and if the semester lasted longer than 14 weeks, could very well have further situated students in the embodied classroom and assisted them in seriously improving their writing skills. For instance, in a high school classroom, where students and teachers meet for thirty-six weeks, classroom members have almost triple the additional time to practice both community building and writing skills. I imagine as high school students continue to blog weekly, their writing agility will increase and their writing skills will improve, for not only does regular writing practice improve one’s writing skills, but the demands of weekly writing exercises might encourage undirected peer editing, reading, and collaboration—exercised both in and outside of class. Eventually, writing collaborations could possibly become second nature to these high school students, and hopefully, encourage their collaborating in other academic spaces and local communities.

However, because our semester is only fourteen weeks long, and less than seven of them were spent blogging, my college students received an introduction, if you will, to blogging practices. Yet those seven weeks—coupled with the weeks spent engaging them via my personal self and their organized accountability groups—were enough to reawaken them to their natural, communal sensibilities. As students became more comfortable with their writerly selves, as well as with their classmates and teachers, they became more open to participating in other writing activities intended to improve writing, such as peer review exercises, writing collaborations, and class discussions and presentations.

Finally, according to the students surveyed, reading and commenting on their peers’ blogs made them aware of their worth, provided shy students courage, and provided others comfort. “Responding to my classmates’ blog posts enhanced the classroom community ‘cause we got the opportunity to get up close and personal with each other [by] learning things we never knew before about one another,” said one student. Other students claimed that engaging in blog exercises allowed them the time to connect with students in a way the allotted fifty-minute class time didn’t allow, while others said blog comments allowed them to connect with students outside of their

accountability groups. "We learn more about each other and that turns us into a small *family* who wants to see each other succeed" (emphasis mine), said another student.

Sometimes, I meet students who embody the characteristics of the technology they carry: unthinking, unfeeling, isolated machines that only do as commanded. Because so many of them are distracted by their communications technologies, they are not engaged in the real-life collaborations that support student learning. Many of them, therefore, perform poorly on their assignments; some fail the course. Likewise, many of my writing students are just as disconnected from other academic service communities—such as the Writing Resource Center, the Library, and the Career Center—as they are their scheduled classes with me. Although these free services are available to students, unless I require them (via extra credit, scheduled presentations, or final grade percentages) to physically go to these learning environments, most students will not seek these services. Neither do most of my students freely attend my office for face-to-face conferences.

Because students' current attachment to their computer technologies often prohibits them from physically and presently engaging with their peers, their teacher, and their learning tasks—thus barring students from engaging in the kinds of collaboration that conjure knowledge of the self and others—I knew I had to meet millennial students where they are, which most teachers are always trying to do. Therefore, to remedy students' disconnection from their classroom community so that they can practice belonging to a "real-life" local community intended to increase both their interpersonal and writing skills, I integrated an online writing community into our traditional embodied classroom setting.

Incorporating a distant online community into an embodied learning environment appears counterintuitive to ensuring that students develop knowledge versus merely receive information. However, not integrating technology—specifically online social networks to which most of our students belong—into a twenty-first century writing classroom would be a disservice to students who can benefit from learning how to use their current technologies to enhance their mind-body-soul connection. Clearly, as sentient beings with an innate desire for belonging, the twenty-first century learner's attachment to online social communities is not simply a trend, but a concerted effort at being in relationship with people. Our students were born into the Google, Facebook, Match.com age, and therefore, engaging them in a community of truth when many of them are committed to online social communities that invite fabrication, anonymity, depersonalization,

violence, and arrogance is vital to their humanity. It is vital to *our* humanity, and really, all there ever is, is *us*. After all, “[r]elationships—not facts and reasons—are the key to reality” (Palmer 53).

Embodied classrooms foster truth through connection and community; therefore, developing the embodied classroom within this current technological era ensures our millennial learners receive meaningful lessons that transcend the classroom environment. Embodied classrooms promise *whole* people who make up a *whole* world where love is all there is. As teachers, we are responsible for helping our students make sense of themselves and the world around them via the subjects they are assigned to take. A traditional approach to classroom writing practices such as those Emig offers is necessary to an academy concerned with the whole student; it is just as necessary as the cutting-edge practices that academies hope will ensure our students’ interest and marketability. Simply, embodied learning is to heart as distanced learning is to brain. They both equal a balanced education, which our millennial students deserve.

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### **Endnotes**

1. All student work is used with permission.
2. Student comments, which are used with permission, were gathered at the semester’s end via an anonymous online questionnaire.

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