Abstract: Eleven years into my teaching career at a small, liberal arts college, I find myself reflecting on my professional identity. How do I reconcile what I once understood to be mutually exclusive: the ethos of the traditional academic with the ethos of technological innovator?

In this piece, I use a narrative peppered with hypertext blankets to tell the story of my deliberations and discoveries as a teacher of first-year composition. It is only a year ago that I decided to substitute the genre of contemporary memoir writing for classical literature in my composition courses; and I've only just piloted my first multi-modal composition course.

A little slow out of the gates, my desire to deploy technology to improve the practice of writing was spurred along when I learned that Jose Bowen,[1] a stalwart proponents of face-to-face learning, acknowledged in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that digital technology would *surely* be a key component of all future higher education. An oracle like this from Bowen was as unexpected as a favorite thoroughbred's defeat at the racetrack by a long-shot.

Quite frankly, my former reluctance to focus on technological innovations in my own pedagogy stemmed from a prejudice that some course subject matter is more amenable to technological modes of presentation than others. Since I began to look into recent research about college teaching and pedagogies to improve critical thinking in learners, I have come to think otherwise. What follows is the story of the seminal modifications that I recently made in my first-year composition course. The modifications, which were borne out of my attempts to locate my pedagogical ideology, enable me to offer two conclusions: 1) Courses offered by the English department don't have revolve around canonical literature and, 2) The teaching of first-year composition isn't so unlike the other ostensibly tech-worthy college courses, after all.

Probiotics for Composition-Health?
Building an Ecology of Memoir Writing and Blended Learning

The myriad of contrasts between the Information Age classroom and the Industrial Age classroom[2] offer woefully inadequate and overly-simplified explanations for the apparent "disconnect" between teachers and students. The theory about generational differences is, of course, plausible. While today's students pack slender Kindles, I-pads and X-Boxes into their cross-chest satchels, I recall the days when I trekked across the campus of my own alma mater. My gait was that of a tipped-hump camel as I lugged cumbersome English anthologies, a stainless-steel thermos of coffee, and a pouch of multi-sided die and ample graph paper to provide entry into the medieval adventure supplied by the first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Needless to say, I could never have imagined the transformation of the requisite school supplies (or, more aptly, personal academic "luxury-items") that mark the shift from the era of education presided over by the likes of Terrel Bell and William Bennett to the era administered by Arne Duncan.

Into my forties, now, I find myself actively resisting the observation that there are inherent learning differences unique to what many have appointed the "millenials." (Admittedly, students today seem more likely to be sipping on venti, five-pump, iced-chai lattes while toting virtual bazookas against the pixilated backdrop of *Grand Theft Auto* than students of yore.) But rather than pay heed to the pedagogical treatises that admonish veteran faculty to "mind the gap" between digital natives (*them*) and the digital immigrants (*us*), I find that there are innovations in teaching first-year composition that have less to do with refitting our teaching for "smart" classrooms or long-distance learning courses than with identifying and implementing course readings that yield discussions and debate about contemporary "hot-button" issues: sustainability, systemic poverty, border control, neocolonial practices of multinational corporations, genetic modification, and 21st century genocide, to name a few. I have long believed that what matters most is *what* we teach--not *how technologically* we teach—in our attempts to find common ground with our students and to invigorate their interest in learning.

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[1] The Southern Methodist University Dean known best for his challenge to educators to teach "naked" or, sans machines.

[2]Generational comparisons range from the works of Jason Frand in 2000 to Marc Prensky in 2001 to Jane Bluestine in 2010.

But this valuation is not to suggest that I am an all-out proponent of "teaching naked."[3] I recognize that technologies can and do play a role in the construction of knowledge.[4] But I am wary of the integration of technology "for its own sake." A hybrid[5] composition classroom—one that blends relevant emerging technology with conventional teaching practices (e.g. emphasis on the rhetorical triangle, the modes of discourse, or socratic questioning) may prove effective—yet only if the course readings resonate with students. The study of literature and writing, as Marjorie Garber contends in *The Use and Abuse of Literature*, is to galvanize students to *ask questions*. She writes, "Poems and novels do not have answers that are immutably true; they do not themselves constitute a realm of knowledge production. Instead, they raise questions, they provoke thought, they produce ideas and generate arguments, they give rise to more poems and more novels" (28). Like Garber then, I believe, that good texts are those with the potential to solicit engagement and/or provocation in order to help facilitate qualitative reflection that may lead to critical thinking and writing.

A Tough Row to Hoe: There is No *How* Without a *What*

One of my colleagues despaired when I mentioned to him that I was replacing the Brontes and the Brownings on my syllabus with a range of contemporary memoirs: Eric Irivuzumugabe's *My Father, Maker of the Trees* (2010), Greg Mortenson's *Stones Into Schools*[6] (2010) Joe Beagant's *Rainbow Pie* (2011) and Colin Beavan's *No Impact Man* (2010). We were having one of those banyan-tree conversations as we wended across the campus green on a balmy March afternoon. His matter-of-fact, collegial tone hinted avuncular when I asked him if he'd ever read any of the oft-vilified popular literature that I was reading with my students. Clearly, my preference for teaching memoir rather than canonical literature had jounced a limb with him: A social sciences professor, he is familiar with the popular genre. His tacit depracation of memoir-writing betrayed what I perceived to be a guardedness against popular "sociological" writers—writers who craft stories about groups of people—yet not genuine ethnographies—books that unfold in not-so-"academic" ways. He decried: "Haven't yet, and don't expect to anytime soon."

To hold footing in the banyan, I resisted the temptation to agitate on behalf of the memoir genre; instead, I proposed what I thought would be a less overtly controversial topic, one that I expected we agreed upon: the mounting administrative expectation to incorporate more emerging technologies in our classroom practices. In my mind, this topic represented some low-hanging fruit for an amicable parting. After all, my colleague—and, dear friend—is the driver of a bumper-sticker-covered 1970s VW-bus. A southerner, he is proficient in email, yet resolves most work-related matters by "calling-on" colleagues. And, unlike most of the campus population who carry ear-buds and MP3 devices, he is still listening to Bob Marley on his 12 inch LPs.

Averse to conflict, I waxed poetic about general observations about higher education's prioritizing of fiscal profits and short-term convenience over the life-long critical thinking skills. But my garden-variety observations grew into a tangle of thistle-like vines as I launched into the story of how, just that morning, I'd learned that nine faculty on our campus had been invited by the Dean's Office to transform their traditional core courses into long-distance learning courses. I exempted myself from any personal interest in moderating such a virtual classroom; but

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[3] See endnote reference to Chronicle of Higher Ed from July 9, 2009 and Jose Bowen's ideas about "Teaching Naked" as contrasted with "smart" classrooms. I argue for some "modesty coverage" or hybridity when it comes to technology.

[4] Farrell, Lesley and Bernard Holkner. "Points of Vulnerability and Presence: Knowing and Learning in Globally Networked Communities." (*Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. Vol. 25, No. 2, June 2004.)

[5] Many higher education faculty refer to "hybrid" learning as "blended" learning. I use the terms interchangeably.

[6] Mortensen's memoirs have been discredited by reports (i.e. 60 Minutes on April 17, 2011) that observe that many of the details of *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools* were falsified or grossly exaggerated by the author. Rather than discontinue the study of his memoirs, these reports convince me of the value of reading his writing with students to further scrutinize the memoir genre as well as the role of authorial "agenda."

I admitted to feeling a bit "passed-over" as I hadn't been among the recruits considered for the pilot group. With a sigh of ambivalence mixed with disdain, I took a vatic (and what I thought might be conciliatory) position as I moved toward closure on our talk: "Long-distance learning is not for me. Besides, when it comes to good teaching, there is no *how* without a *what*.[7]

My anecdote and opining did nothing to restore the balance between us. Rather than secure our footing, my segue just presented another apple of discord. As such, my colleague offered one cryptic quip before retreating into his bell-bottom blue mini-bus: "Renounce technology and you'll have a tough row to hoe."

I couldn't ignore this admonition. (An amateur gardener, I realize that sometimes rototilling the soil can pay off. Yet, I prefer the simplicity and calm of bamboo shoots in water to the challenge of plowing a rock-hard garden bed.) Along my commute home, I pondered my colleague's cautionary retort. I knew that I needed to commit to some serious deliberations when it came to planning for the fall semester, my next opportunity to teach a course on memoir writing. I would need to go beyond professorial "intuition" as I redefined the *what* and the *how* for the course. It dawned on me that if I wanted smart growth among my students, I would need to devote myself to the sprawl of contemporary debate and research on 21st century teaching and learning in higher education. Only then could I deliberately guide and support learning for my students. In other words, I needed time to more carefully formulate a vision for the content and pedagogical approaches that would inform teaching in the upcoming semester.

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Admittedly, there has been much controversy about replacing canonical literary selections with what some describe as the trendy, popular genre of the memoir. But from my experiences piloting memoir in the composition classroom over the past semester, I have come to see the substitution as one that builds meaning for students. As Megan Brown contends in her article, "The Memoir as Provocation: A Case for 'Me Studies' in Undergraduate Classes,[8]" contemporary memoir writing requires that students "engage with the contexts in which they operate, such as social relationships, environments, conventions, and expectations" (126). In other words, by integrating memoir into a curriculum designed to teach cogent writing and critical thinking, students become active learners; students become more adept readers and writers because the readings are both accessible and relevant. The shift away from conventional readings, I believe, is one possibility for reaching our millennial student population; memoir writing can, in some cases, galvanize active learning and can serve to restore mindful practice and civic participation in the broader communities. This is not to say that the Brontes or the Brownings won't provide a medium for students to learn. However, the very immediacy and viscerality of the content of real-life narratives offers an intimacy with literature that enables students to engender the questions that Garber sees as the root of education. So, this breach with my colleague was one that I reasoned, was not a cause for misgivings about what I wanted students to read as far as course content: the *what* that memoir offered my students was, after all, a very different *what* that he was working toward addressing in his classes in the social sciences. We could, with our respective epistemological systems, agree to differences in our valuation of memoir-writing.

Pied Piper of Punk[9]

[7] See Christopher Beha's review from April 17, 2011 titled "The Heart of the Canon."
[8] *College Literature*; Summer 2010.
[9] Kathryn Crowther's blog "Putting Punk Into Technology" uses the infinitive verb "to punk" as a synonym for adding multimodality to teaching.

Having affirmed this resolve to identify memoir writing as the prevailing genre for the course, I began to rethink the *how*. My predicament was this: I needed to ascertain the optimum pedagogy for my student-learners. To become more conversant with potential applications of technology in the composition classroom, I gathered volumes of pedagogically-centered research—a category of texts, journal articles and web sites that I have been, ironically, somewhat unused to reading since I began full-time teaching eleven years ago.

As I bored into the research, I sorted the texts into two stacks: the neo-traditional pedagogical stack, (or, the stack that advocated a classical constructivist approach to rhetoric and composition) and the technologically-steeped stack (or, texts that incorporated multimodality in composition, or, an emphasis on using a digital pedagogy to improve student thinking and writing). Sorting the writings into pedagogical camps, it became apparent that the digital pedagogies stack was beginning to tower over the pile of neo-traditional pedagogical resources. Article after article, text after text, and site after site, my colleague's voice resounded in my head: the future for teachers would indeed be a "tough row to hoe" without dexterity in classroom applications of digital media. (Among the most persuasive articles in the stack were the writings of Cynthia Selfe and Jonathan Alexander who demonstrate that first-year composition courses can be enhanced through computer and video gaming and related modalities. An unwitting advocate of digital technology, Hubert Dreyfus suggests that even while technology won't suffice as a substitute for emotional, involved, embodied learning, that the dominance of technology in the classroom is—at least for the foreseeable future-- here to stay.)

Though the preponderance of contemporary research seems to deify emerging technologies, punked heuristics for learning do not warrant impunity. Neoluddite treatises that favor the traditional educational heuristics over the digital oligarchy give ample reason for pause: one must consider, for instance, Edward Tufte's research—research that ascribes NASA engineering failures to what he describes as the "fatal" effects of Power Point's reductionist, bulleted information.[10] The work of Nicholas Carr makes a more sweeping claim. In *What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), he purports that internet technology allows students to substitute "cursory reading, distracted thinking and superficial learning" for deep thinking. And in *Alone Together* (2011), Sherry Turkell decries the stultified intellectual and social growth among today's youth and adolescents—an epidemic that she attributes to the generation's dependence on digital technologies.

Immersed in the readings, I vacillated like a vessel tossed on the mercy of the open sea. Trying to identify my own position on digital technologies in higher education, I swung back and forth from technology "naysayer"[11] to technology "evangelist."[12] Then, like a gale-force wind, I encountered Garrison and Vaughan's book *Blended Learning in Higher Education* (2008) in which the authors contend that faculty need to "reject the dualistic thinking that seems to demand choosing between conventional face-to-face and online learning"—a dualism which they recognize as neither theoretically nor practically tenable (4-5). A more sensible way forward, according to their treatise, is for teachers to better understand the potential of these technologies and how they might be *integrated alongside of the best of the face-to-face learning environment*. Their research cautions against what may become an *a la carte* incorporation of technology. Effective blended learning, for Garrison and Vaughn, requires a framework that informs the integration of face-to-face and online learning; in other words, to sustain private reflection and

[10] Tufte, Edward. "The Cognitive Style of Power Point." November 2009.

[11] I was, for instance, well-persuaded by Edward Tufte at Yale who problematizes the application of PowerPoint software as it has been utilized in environments as varied as classrooms, corporate headquarters and control centers for NASA engineering. In his essay "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint, Tufte describes the potentially fatal effects of the softwares unhelpfully simplistic tables, charts and hierarchies. For more on this, see his essay "The Cognitive Style of Power Point" from November 2009.

critical thinking in learners, teachers must develop organic learning environments—learning environments in which the modes of teaching and learning are carefully integrated.

As an educator who believes in rupturing the proverbial "binary," the blended learning model immediately resonated with me; blended learning is, in some ways, the extension of postmodernity in the ecology of the classroom. The practice of blending learning is consistent with the tenet that the "either/or" model fails to aptly reflect truth or reality. And beyond the epistemological arguments that support blended learning, there are practical reasons to blend learning. For instance, there are palpable administrative incentives to implement blended learning pedagogies: tenure and promotion applications offer large blank spaces for faculty to substantiate technological proficiency in the classroom. Allocation of grant money seems dependent upon the promise of research and practice connected to innovative technology.

But promotion and grant applications aside, a germane curiosity about how technological innovation may improve traditional teaching beckons educators to stay in the know: we read journals about contemporary trends, participate in conferences with keynote speakers who market themselves as "progressive" or as "pushing the envelope" and we stoke the coffee-talk dialogue in the faculty lounge by jargon-dropping about our widgits that repose in "symbaloo," our files that float on "clouds," and our latest epiphanies catalogued in "evernote." Thus, there are indubitable benefits for embracing "blended" learning—some borne out of a professional pride and others borne out of the personal. Regardless of the incentive, the blended learning pedagogies offer teachers a spectrum of choice. One need not succumb to polarizing arguments about technology and its applications for teaching; in much the same way that I don't believe in the demarcation between digital natives and digital immigrants, I realize that it isn't necessary to brand oneself as a naysayers or evangelist.

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Ready to recreate my composition course through an organic and blended educational paradigm, I resolved to acquire the requisite hands-on practice and informal training. As the start of the new term was only weeks away, I had neither the time nor the funding to participate in a formal technological training program. With the "make-or-break" pluck of a pioneer farmer without an almanac, I willed myself to surmount the learning curve ahead. There was, in my mind, no better way to get training and experience than by asking for help from students. So, in less than a day's time, I scouted out the most Zuckerberg-like CSI majors on campus—students with both technical proficiency and passion. Tracking them down at the student center, I introduced myself and proffered a trade: pizza and subs, iced-coffee and Red-Bull in exchange for game-instruction and an overview of the fundamentals of emergent media. My proposal was quickly accepted and, in a baptism- by-fire series of demonstrations and tutorials, I was well on my way toward digital proficiency. Through their informal instruction, I began to negotiate my way through the realm of digital modalities: I recognized the value of replacing outlines for lectures and reading assignments with uploaded hypertext documents--documents supported by an infusion of links that delivered supplemental content as well as images or animations —to accommodate readers with a predilection for dialectic rather than linear reading and thinking; I discovered how avatars could support collaboration exercises; and I found ways to integrate role-playing games to foster student engagement and social responsibility. These technologies for processing and creating information promised to be a boon to the ecology of classroom learning. Like a probiotic in the digestive track, digital technology can support the classroom ecology: blending traditional heuristics with digital technologies can, I discovered, potentially improve and affirm literacy, and, more broadly, critical thinking, among students.

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[12] In teaching matters of ethics, game technology such as "Grand Theft Auto" offers, according to Barry Fishman at the University of Michigan, "fascinating ethical problems" that enhance the learning experience.

To be fair, my pedagogical research and the crash course in technologies were not so radically transformative that I yearned to unburden myself of my traditional heuristics and greet students at the portals of a virtual learning classroom. I wasn't going to lurch forward in the campus stampede for online learning. Having already replaced canonical readings with memoir writing, I was merely primed to initiate the reformulation of my pedagogical vision. The corollary that followed the *what*, in my mind, was this: it was time to update the *way* I taught—the *how*. I'd researched the current literature, I'd found mentors to give me the requisite experience: I felt ready to begin to implement more technology to blend teaching and learning.

The initial changes that I made were more or less cosmetic pedagogical changes: I made myself more readily available to students through FB and texting in addition to the standard office hours and email. I incorporated virtual dialogue as a way to earn course credit by inviting students to participate in an ongoing blog. While I didn't want a blog to serve as a substitute for face-to-face dialogue and debate between students, I recognized that marginalized students might use the blog as a safe space to participate in reflection and dialogue. It would also provide a venue for continuing dialogue about issues that didn't get enough air-time during class. And I decided to upload the syllabus as a fluid work-in-progress document rather than a resolute artifact that bound students to my authoritative choices as a bona-fide contract. These were ways that I could adjust the parameters of my pedagogy through a handful of minor adjustments. I felt a bit more tentative about transforming my contact hours with students. I regularly tried to discern the potential consequences of my transformation: would the blended learning yield better student outcomes?

Blooming Where We Are Planted

The initial reading that I assigned for the composition course was Colin Beavan's *No Impact Man* (2010). By the time that I introduced the book's title and, relatedly, its quirky and cumbersome subtitle--*The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process*--I could detect, almost palpably—a strong student wave of ennui. While I enthused about the book, my students were discreetly diverting their attention toward their cell phones for time-checks, text-updates, and tweets. I was aware that An Inconvenient Truth had, for some, ecclipsed the issue of global warming by overpoliticizing climate science. But this wasn't the only reason for the lack of interest. My students just did not care about what I had misjudged as a "hot-button" issue—the endangered environment.

Rather than attempt to proselytize students by cataloguing the merits of ecological stewardship (such ranting, according to pedagogical studies, contributes little to critical thinking), I asked that students volunteer what they already knew about "ecological" footprints. In other words, I invited students to contemplate the environmental "crisis" and to voice their own responses to what many environmentalists have identified as the primary exigency facing the millennial population. This open-ended prompting helped to enliven interest. Many students volunteered that they'd measured their carbon footprints in high-school; some were nonplussed by the daily-toll of their routines on the environment while others ranged from mild to moderate in their avowed concern about consumption habits . Some of the more cynical students countered that climate change was just hype; in their own experiences, they saw no evidence to substantiate the claims of scientists. And one student, Jillisa,[13] a student seemingly poised for a major in statistics or sociology, reported that for every American child born, he/she would live to consume 25 times as many natural resources as a child born in India.

As we continued our study of the memoir over the next class meeting, we focused on a close reading of the text using the Elements of Reasoning. We considered Beavan's purpose, the reasons that he cites for getting millennials to quit what he describes as the hedonic treadmill, his book's assumptions about values, its implications for our quotidian actions, his argument about collective responsibility and committed grass roots action, as well as problems posed by his memoir—some of which he readily admits and other problems that readers perceive as they

[13] The names of students have been changed to protect their privacy.

study the text.[14] These seminal questions fostered rich classroom dialogue. But as much as this systematic approach to the text invited students into the conversation, I noticed that some students still lurked, tentatively, on the margins of the conversation. There was one student who, though lively in conversation before and after class, was unwilling to participate in the classroom discussion. Since I suspected that he was capable of astute analysis—he was the only underclassman starting as quarterback on the college's football team—I was eager to reclaim what I perceived to be his lapsed attention. Careful not to put him on the spot during class, I directed a question at him through email: "How," I proposed, "do you respond to Beavan's ecological experiment? You've been pretty quiet during class. But I am truly interested in hearing your perspective." Almost immediately, he fired back a response: "Unlike Beavan," he divulged, "I don't care about recycling, conservation or waste. Global warming is liberal-hype." Impassioned, he disclosed that he "got back" at the college for gouging him on tuition increases—by taking marathon-long hot showers in the residence halls. In this way, he said, he was reaping his money's worth at the Division III college—especially since he felt worthy of an athletic scholarship. "Ecology," he vowed, "be damned."

This student wasn't alone in his resistance to the college's costly tuition or his unwillingness to take blame or responsibility for global warming. Adrift in the challenges of college life, this young adult had more immediate issues competing for his money, energy and attention. I couldn't pretend that he was an exception in the class of 25 students; it was fairly obvious that several students were disinterested in the memoir and had determined to get through the core course with the least amount of intellectual investment. And Beavan wasn't the easiest person for my students—mostly middle-class students from rural Kentucky and Indiana to relate to. My students thought that this forty-two year old husband and father living in Greenwich Village was an oddity: Beavan had, after all, pledged to live without the conveniences of toilet tissue, television, and prepackaged foods—and he proudly nurtured an in-house collection of musty compost eating worms on his kitchen counter. His resolve to shut off electricity and to live life "off-the-grid" staggered my students; rather than see Beavan's efforts as noble sacrifices, my students interpreted his efforts as abject deprivation. To them, a bubble bath was a child's ritual bedtime pleasure and a woman's articicial hair color, her prerogative. As my students concluded the memoir, I encountered an even more vitriolic response than I could have anticipated. The self-appointed student leader of the class, Breon, blogged that the very idea that publishing a hard-cover book to improve ecology was an irony: "This so-called 'green-book'—which could have been abridged and circulated as an e-file—took an ecological toll as far as its manufacture and transport." But even more importantly, continued Breon, the book "drained what to me is the most important nonrenewable resource of all: my time."

It took me some time to recover from the surprise I felt when I read this response. Instead of lobbying a defense of the text or a justification for the hours of reading I'd asked students to invest in the memoir, I reigned in my impulse to respond to his post. I reasoned that despite the disdain the he and others felt for *No Impact Man*, that the memoir was proving a productive reading: the students were, after all, opinionated and impassioned. Whether they agreed or disagreed with Beavan's initiative, they were more invested than they might have been if I'd been teaching *Pride and Prejudice*. As I made this resolve, I also determined that to move beyond merciless lampoonery of an easy target, I would need to redirect my teaching to propel students toward critical thinking. And this is where the blended learning model began to prove its value in my composition classroom.

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In a shift that marked a watershed moment in my teaching career, I decided to incorporate technology to advance the study of literature over the next several class meetings; the subject matter alone had impassioned student response but I was eager to identify a more effective conduit to engage students with systematic thinking

[14] The initial classroom discussions about the memoir were infused with the methodology for Critical Thinking promoted by the Paul-Elder model of Critical Thinking. As a participant in the college's FLC on Critical Thinking, I've spent the last two years practicing a variety of heuristics associated with the Foundation for Critical Thinking.

about values.[15] With this end in mind, I decided to phase in digital technologies including 1) interactive software such as the ecological footprint calculator and skype interface, 2) streaming video—featuring scenes from "Flow: For the Love of Water," a documentary about the global water crisis 3) social media that offered students a way to connect with real world revolutionary awareness and change and 4) gaming such as the "Virtual Tour Grocery Store" that offers student consumers a way to better gage consumer CT. The student-returns on these digital media proved considerable. What follows is an explanation of how I revised the curriculum to continue our study of the first of three course memoirs.

Phase I: Although most of my students had been asked to measure their ecological footprint by former high school teachers or coaches, I asked them to recalculate the measurement as college students with new consumption habits. I had dual purposes for their recalibration. I wanted them to take responsibility for their own individual toll (not their family's toll) on the environment so that they might begin to internally audit their own use of resources. I also hoped that their measurement would resonate with Beavan's statistics about the effect that "disposable" plastic bags that find their way in to the oceans have on wildlife. If nothing else, it seemed that all of the students were moved by Beavan's account of the leatherback turtles that washed up dead on Jersey's shores because of digestions blocked by plastic bag consumption.

I asked students to calculate their ecological footprint by using software at http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/calculators/. This site enabled students to calibrate resource-consumption through the creation of animated avatars. The customized images reflected, for students, individual consumption levels. While we could have calibrated footprint measurements through a classroom questionnaire or workshop, the use of avatars allowed students to calculate ecological imprint with privacy and discretion. As the site invited students to calibrate and reflect on routine habits and actions, it also offered ideas for concrete change suited to a student's particular demographic. For instance, links at the site invite college students to step-up efforts to reduce consumption on their campuses by recycling and reducing printing privileges. Other links offer students information about participating in eco-awareness campaigns. The site is free of the constraints of the traditional classroom in which students might resist disclosing their incriminating environmental choices or, on the other hand, might parrot environmental values in an effort to construct the "right" ethos.

Phase II: In addition to using avatars with students, I connected students to a sustainability expert who'd trained with Beavan in an outreach workshop intended to galvanize grassroots civic organization. I'd met Amy Strosser through a mutual acquaintance and what drew me to her as a resource for the course was that she had read Beavan's book and had transformed her own lifestyle in order to live more efficiently through local consumption habits and advocacy for the preservation of natural resources. Though I'd first met her face-to-face, several weeks before the start of the semester (--we'd met at the local co-op where she combined her bi-monthly shopping trip with our meeting so to conserve gas consumption), she was reluctant to travel to campus to meet with students because of the 20 mile commute. In lieu of a personal visit, she offered, instead, to skype with students during a class meeting. This compromise reflected sound thinking: it honored her environmental commitment yet allowed her to interact with students to share her civic commitment. And, the video conference was a fitting use of software for my blended learning classroom ecology. In the dimly lit classroom, students eagerly anticipated Strosser's virtual visit. Her telecommunication was a fitting substitute for a face-to-face meeting. As if she was physically present to students, she introduced herself and offered her own perspective on "sustainability." Rather than lecture, her visit was largely conversational and anecdotal. For instance, she offered students her own story of conversion, taught them a recipe for borax-based household cleaners and baking-soda toothpaste, and reassured them that their local choices (to eat closer to the earth, to drive less, to find serenity in deliberation) could give birth to global renewel. Our skype experience with Strosser spawned interest. Students responded to her with questions with her about her values, her challenges—especially with regard to personal hygiene—and about the Beavan's portent about the water scarcity crisis. And the questions that she could not answer became areas for students to pursue. When the visit

[15] This is not to suggest that the Paul-Elder model lacked efficacy.

ended, students turned back to our class discussion with energy and—what I perceived to be—a level of intrigue that they had perhaps not felt when they'd merely read the memoir. The skype exchange had put them in direct contact with an ecological "expert" and allowed them the opportunity to engage with Beavan's approach to the environment—his unique point of view as well as his purpose for writing about the environment—as well as his assumptions, inferences and call to action. While students may not have felt a connection with the author—a middle-aged Manhattanite—they seemed to better identify with Strosser, a recent college graduate who had become a vital member of the local community through her grass roots commitment to change.

Phase III: To get students to apply the text to their own lives, I arranged for students to participate in an ecological experiment. But rather than conduct the experiment individually and to track individual results in journals, I asked students to use the blog to record and report the trials and tribulations associated with the experiment. The seven-day, cumulative experiment started with water conservation on day one and progressed, in terms of challenge, through the week. By the middle of the week, students were expected to reduce carbon emissions by biking or carpooling and by the week's end, they were challenged to minimize electricity and—perhaps get off the grid entirely.

My preference for blogging through the experiment rather than journaling through the experiment stemmed from my sense that the blog would allow students a venue for more publicly venting frustrations or, alternately, sharing accomplishments. In other words, while the experiment was individualized, the blog would enable students the social component of collaboration. According to the research, academics "have been a little slow getting out of the starting blocks when it comes to using blogging as a means of knowledge construction with students" (Williams and Jacobs 4) . But, Ferdig and Trammel find that blogs are a mode of interaction more conducive to active learning, higher order thinking and greater flexibility in teaching and learning (paraphrase from "Content Delivery in the Blogosphere"). Williams and Jacobs emphasize their point that "blogs have the potential, at least, to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers" (9).

Having posted questions about the experiment on the blog, I added links to the blog template. Several links—links that I found in Beavan's appendix—offered data about the environment provided by government supported organizations such as UNICEF or the EPA. Another link gave students access to a streaming video called "Flow: For the Love of Water." Through this award-winning documentary by Irena Salina, students could investigate what experts describe as the most important political and environmental issue of the 21st Century: the scarcity of water. Even Tyler, the student who, weeks earlier, had vowed vengeance on the college through his deliberately long showers, reported being moved by the film. Transformed by the film, he seemed genuinely staggered by the statistics related to water scarcity and indicated that he'd "twist his wrist" and shorten his showers to conserve the sacred resource.

With these links at their fingertips, students could access a range of statistics and data with ease. While I asked students to blog occasionally, about their findings, students contributed with some surprising level of regularity. The exchanges offered evidence that my students were, for the most part, actively engaging with the subject matter. And at least a few of my students seemed to be profoundly changed by the collective experience of blending the traditional reading of the text with the technological heuristics. Irene, a single mother who had just begun college at the age of 44, recorded her new level of consciousness: "When Randy [her toddler] and I went to eat at our favorite restaurant last night, I was told by the manager that they could not accommodate our request to plate our food on our own recycled serving ware. We up and left. I won't contribute to the depletion of the earth by eating on throw-away papers and plates. It was a tough decision but I am happy to have made it even though my son and I have celebrated a lot of special occasions there." Her intentionality marked a shift in her own awareness and offered an example of local action that seemed to resonate with fellow students who perhaps had become more aware of their own deletrious conveniences.

Phase IV: On one of the final days of our study of *No Impact Man*, I arranged for my students, who, for the most part are novice grocery shoppers, to compete as eco-minded, health conscientious shoppers at a web site called "The Virtual Grocery Store," http://www.healthyeatingisinstore.ca/vgs/vgs_en.html, sponsored by the Dietitians of Canada and the Canadian Diabetes Association. The game, which was as educational as it was entertaining, offered an opportunity for students to earn points for their strategies related to meal planning. After arranging the class into teams, the players shopped a virtual grocery to create a meal plan. Their selections earned points depending upon the ecology of the item, its nutrient density and its cost efficiency. As the site tallied student points and appointed a winning team, it enabled students to review food alternatives that would have proven more effective in terms of environmental concerns, personal health, and consumer costs.

As a follow-up to the game—since it only required a few minutes of our class time—we explored a web site sponsored by Greenpeace http://gmoguide.greenpeace.ca/shoppers_guide.pdf to gain an appreciation of the risks posed by genetically modified crops.[16] The exploration of this site enabled students to more fully appreciate Beavan's interest (in chapter six) in the social, ethical and environmental responsibilities that we shoulder when it comes to making choices about consumption.[17] In other words, the multi-modal supplement to what some students may have interpreted as Beavan's pontificating, seemed to offer students other vantage points for thinking more critically about the types of food that we finance and consume. The follow-up seemed a worthwhile endeavor as most students were utterly astounded by Greenpeace data about agribusiness practices and the lack of agricultural regulations on fertilizers and pesticide use as well as increasing reliance on GMOs.

Coda: To conclude our study of *No Impact Man*, I invited students to join ranks with other global activists through the use of social media. More particularly, students were offered the opportunity to channel environmental awareness into activism through the "Day Without Shoes" campaign—an annual, international campaign that raises awareness about systemic poverty and the destruction of natural resources through multinational corporations. Students demonstrated their concern and compassion through web-registration (an act of solidarity with demonstrators on a global level) and a grass-roots community-supported barefoot-procession. Participation in the campaign was voluntary. Thus, I was astounded by both the high level of turnout and the media attention garnered by the event: these same students who had vocally resisted *No Impact Man* only weeks earlier—students who I have come to think of as "Reluctant Environmentalists,[18]" had become regional ambassadors of global awareness and ethical responsibility. While certainly not as revolutionary as the fomenters of the Arab uprisings in early 2011that toppled regimes across the Arab world—my students utilized technology to galvanize awareness and action. Braving the cold earth with bare feet, the campus campaigners got people talking about systemic poverty; ultimately, their demonstration spawned a collection of several carloads of gently-worn shoes that they delivered to local shelters. Thus, the web based campaign, communicated through social media, gave my students a role through which to voice compassion and demonstrate their investment as conscientious and eco-minded, ethical citizens of the world.[19]

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[16] Currently, the Food and Drug Administration requires genetically modified labeling only if biotechnology changes the nutritional profile of the food or introduces an allergen. In England, however, GM labeling is required. While US consumers seem relatively unconcerned about GM foods, many consumers, internationally, are calling for labelling.

[17] Beavan makes reference to Michael Pollan throughout this chapter. Like Pollan, Beavan is an advocate of seasonal, local, and organic consumption habits.

[18] This is a play on words. See Mohsin Hamid's book with a similar title *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007).

[19] Over 350, 000 global citizens went barefoot as participants in the "Day Without Shoes" campaign.

It would be naïve of me to think that all of my students were radically transformed by the semester-long study of memoir writing and the technologically-supported activities related to the respective readings. However, for the first time in years, student interest and investment surpassed my expectations. It wasn't until several weeks after the semester that I learned that the course had initiated a sort of ripple of change among a handful of students: some had actually initiated participation in a broader, ongoing campaign to preserve global resources. Having read the memoir, and then participated in active learning that was, in most cases, technologically-centered, students enlisted their support for an electronically circulated petition that calls upon the United Nations to add Article 31 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[20] The petition, which one student forwarded to my attention after the term had come to a close, pledged support for solving the water scarcity crisis. By signing their names to the petition,[21] students actively worked to make change as they simultaneously cultivated and confirmed their identities as reflective consumers.

So I believe that my blended-learning experiment in first-year composition course--a course that already diverged from convention through its reliance on memoir writing—was a success. Through its face-to-face meetings coupled with a range of internet related programs and games—in short, blended learning—students became a community of active learners. But when I reflect on the semester, I cannot fall into the trap of retrospective falsification; it would be disingenuous to downplay the initial resistance of students toward *No Impact Man*. There was certainly a good deal of doubt and misgiving on my part as we began our study of the Beavan text. Now, however, I read this moment of struggle as the moment that enabled me to affirm my resolve to implement digital learning techniques. But the initial nadir serves as an important marker for calibrating what would, eventually, become intellectual, social, and moral growth.

Having completed my first hybridized course, I believe that there is at least one touchstone worth considering to determine if a course has been a success. (After all, not many of my students will become lobbyists who protect endangered species and help to regulate the use of natural resources.) If the course has helped to make students more mindful as readers and writers—in short, as cognizant civic participants—then for me, the course has achieved a worthwhile goal. One semester, after all, is not quite enough to save the planet. But like a SPIN[22] farmer who converts an urban plot to a harvest-rich garden—maximizing the yield on what might have been an uncultivated sub-acre, then I have helped to initiate growth unencumbered by dogma (i.e. the prevailing dogma that farmers need hundreds of acres, synthetically modified starters and thousands in financing) and attentive to the development of potential growth and fellowship. The technology that a SPIN farmer uses is a blend: it is not dependent on synthetic chemical controls or cumbersome complexes for irrigation. Instead, the technology for these small urban plots is a blend of the traditional with the appropriate and accessible modern conveniences that, once administered, produce a high-quality local yield.

I wish to conclude this narrative about my deliberations and discoveries in the field of composition pedagogy in the spirit of Robert Coles, an elequent spokesperson for global caretaking and civic action through education. I have long appreciated Coles and his legendary valediction to students at each semester's end as it offers students a place to begin. Unassumingly, he offers these words: "I hope this course will be many things to many [of you]. I hope you'll turn over some of what you heard [this semester] in your mind" (264). This valediction, which seems to me to be more a call to awareness and responsibility than a farewell at parting, is worthy of reprisal. We,

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[20] Article 31 would tweak the language of the Declaration to identify access to clean water as a human *right*, not a *privilege.*

[21] I hope you agree with me that water is a right and not a privilege, and that this addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents the first step toward the goal of water for all-- please join me! Water is a right, not a privilege. See and sign the petition to adopt Article 31: http://freeflo.org/article31

[22] SPIN is an acronym for small plot intensive farming, an agricultural initiative that seems to be gaining ground in urban centers because of it makes farming uninhibited by traditional land and financial barriers.

as experienced educators, cannot reside in the either/or binaries. Instead, we must be willing to contemplate the ever-changing factors that provide an optimum ecology for a learning-centered classroom. Blended learning—pedagogies that we may resist for generational reasons—may empower students to not only thrive in their own environments, but to till the landscapes beyond the college walls. Spin-farmers in the making, these students who have thrived in the blended environment, will continue to support the growth of the brightest and best varietals of voice and action—and become the stewards that Beavan hails as the future leaders of this world.

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