

Paragraphs from a manifesto on pure learning in the age of digital postmodernism

“As a university professor of English, how has my perception of technology used in education, such as Blackboard (Bb) changed and evolved?”

I suppose it comes down to a word. My perception of Bb has changed because my *attitude* towards it has evolved. I am more indifferent to it.

Yet my perception of Bb is like my perception of a poem, both are machines; I am comfortable with the difficulty poems manifest; I wasn't comfortable with the difficulties of Bb until I decided to approach it like a poem. How is technology like a poem?

Using the collage method, approaching the platform experimentally, and visually, opened up some possibilities.

“There was a time—like in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*—where the characters jumped off the screen and entered into real life in order to be embodied—a poetic situational reversal. Today, reality massively transfuses itself into the screen in order to become disembodied. Nothing any longer separates them. The osmosis, the telemorphosis, is total.”¹ The history of institutions shows that conformity elides consciousness. Using collage and the short session subverts conformity. The lesson resides in the interstices, just like in collage. Juxtaposition is the only position. In this age of media rubbish, less is more. Realizing this helped immensely. Bb can be approached as a writing machine.

I am old—school. I like words like “lecture,” “discussion,” and “argument.” Online environments are not made for that, so I had to rethink my whole approach. In all of my online courses, the principal question stayed the same. So how do you grow a writer, a writer set apart from the common babble of tongues? The question for the student (and instructor) becomes a little more problematic mediated through screens and I found I would not be able to engender writing and close reading over this medium, or so I thought.

Remote learning can be a lonely experience for the student—but for a writer that's good and I began to find Bb supported and even promoted that. I think it is better to be alone and unwell than it is to be in a classroom and well (i.e., “comfortable”).

By unwell, I mean a state of unfocussed attention; a state in which the process of writing suppresses and subdues the product of writing. This is not easy to do, since the machinery in place is

¹ Jean Baudrillard in *Telemorphosis* (U of Minnesota Press, 2012)

product-forming. At this point I saw that not only did classes pivot to online during the pandemic, but so did my perception of the medium. The potential of the educational technology began to reveal itself—I decided to think of online space as a theatre space, as a form of gallery that required curators—talk less, show more, keep the session short. The learning outcomes will have to come out in the interstices—in the space between the virtual sessions. This brings us to what I am calling the collage method

I mentioned the poem above. Bb is also like a collage—random fragments of this thing or that thing pasted together and composed—there is always an order. “The collage method is a tool for transformative practice based on the brain’s inherent re-creative cycle.”² My transformative practice was from in-class to online teaching and getting comfortable and open with technology to support learning in my new mode of teaching. “The collage process provides an interface to the Symbolic Function, which is embodied in the procedure.”³

“In the future collage will be an important means of (self) education. We will all put the pieces of our case histories [and experiences] together and experiment with the simple process of splicing and superimposition, to reach, maybe, the margins of our expression.”⁴

“It’s our process made visual. The design process always begins with collage. I may have moved from the traditional cut-out and pinned-up mood boards to digital Pinterest boards—[or even Instagram feeds and Instagram stories—they disappear after 24 hours and so the collage is remade. Learning begins anew and happens at a measured pace] but the action is the same.”⁵ I am now open to (and even a little excited) exploring Pinterest in the classroom to support the visual, which I would have never been pre-pandemic; “we pull from our influences and inspirations, using the fragments of what came before in search of something new.”⁶ And that something new for me is a new level of digitally literacy.

I found that the within the new medium and within this evolutionary framework and evolving context I could also include some films, which contributed to my preference for the new medium and my willingness to explore more technologies. Through this evolutionary framework, a

² “Chaos, Creation, and Collage” available @ <https://frankolsonproject.org/collage-method/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Jarrett Fuller in “Wormwood and the collage method” available @ <https://medium.com/@jarrettfuller/wormwood-and-the-collage-method-b01c21ee31fa>

⁶ Ibid

more student-centered teaching style developed where I encourage students to find films and other works of visual art including advertisements and publicity images themselves and explore them.

By exploring and adopting new educational tools I can still keep teaching as a performing art, but like any artist I have to be comfortable and confident in trying something new in the classroom.

Extending the analogy a little further, I would compare the new technology to modernist new criticism. We are far beyond the binaries that characterize new criticism, particularly the reader-author binary, but the metaphor reveals a new relationship with the text. An editor I know is fond of asserting, “I don’t publish authors; I publish texts.”⁷

Teaching remotely has a lot to do with teaching to texts since the machinery is there to respond to students textually; that is, “in writing.” . . .

The next time you notice a hybrid classroom peek in. You will find desks and chairs with wheels attached—so that they can be easily moved about and situated. The collage method at work in the very design and architecture of the space.

The idea of teaching remotely did not appeal to me in the least. But the platform is a laboratory which is also a classroom. I’ve used the metaphor of the machine and the mechanic as a way of understanding the platform—and approach. But I had a good mechanic in Ken Harmel. A typical Zoom call session between us would go like this. Me—“I want to do this and I want it to look this way”; Ken—“OK”; Me—“Can we do it?” Ken—“Sure” . . . Ken, thank you—

⁷ Karl Siegler