"Writing CC Students into the Digital Landscape"

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[**slide 0**] At open-access community-colleges such as Lane, where I teach, writing *studies* always begins—and often ends—with practice and with our students and the conditions of their lives. Writing studies research is constrained at community colleges by limited resources and infrastructure.[1] Seeing writing studies from the unique perspective of the CC "bring[s] some parts of writing studies into sharp focus. [**slide 1**] For the last 7 years I have been working to adapt digital humanities methods for community-college students, and in so doing I have found that my writing and scholarship have become more like advocacy work. This work has helped me see that pedagogy in community colleges and equity in higher education are inextricable.

A brief survey of the CC landscape will help illuminate this advocacy/pedagogy link: [**slide 2**]

> There are 992 public community colleges in the US, and community college students make up 46% of all undergraduates and 41% of all first-time freshmen. The scale of these numbers guarantees impacts on equity: Sixty-one percent of Native American college undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges; 52% of Black students and 43% of Asian/Pacific Islander undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges; 50% of Hispanic college students begin at community college. In the US, 59% of community college students are enrolled part-time, and 59% are women (American Association of Community Colleges, "Enrollments"). Meanwhile, a key consideration for writing studies at CCs is that 70% of the instructional workforce of community colleges is part-time.

> Writing students at CCs are, for the most part, living lives immersed in precarity, and only the grittiest of them will overcome the effects of systemic disadvantage, claim their degrees, and achieve economic mobility, higher ed's long-held promise. The facts of their lives brings my own digital pedagogy into sharp focus. 44% percent of low-income students attend community colleges as their first college out of high school as compared to 15% of high-income students (Community College Research Center). Sixty-nine percent of community college students work, with 33% working more than 35 hours per week; 22% are full-time students employed full-time; 40% are full time students employed part-time; and 41% of part-time students are employed full-time. And first-generation students make up 36% of community college student populations (American Association of Community Colleges, "Fast Fact Sheet").

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[1] Holly Hassell and Joanne Baird Giordano provide compelling data and arguments to help us rethink Writing Studies for the teaching majority, improving equity by moving resources to where they are most needed ("Occupying Writing Studies: Rethinking College Composition for the Needs of the Teaching Majority" in Patrick M. Sullivan and Christie Toth (Eds) Teaching Composition at the Two-Year College: Background Readings. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017.)

Some CC students are digital natives, but not all, and we can't assume a single meaning for the category "digital native" especially when thinking of the curricular demands of humanities computing and digital pedagogy, even at the freshman and sophomore levels. **[slide 3]**

So given this context, I'd like to first outline a frame for how I teach writing and digital humanities at my open-access institution. I have developed this frame from several sources: a learning theory approach informed by David Perkins, an equity lens informed by scholars examining privilege and middle-class assumptions about learning, and, closer to Writing Studies itself, an approach to helping students cope with cognitive dissonance and threshold concepts; community college students also need an equity lens on the value system implicit in expectations of "college knowledge."

In my course Reading, Writing, and Digital Culture, I have taken an holistic approach to translating digital humanities methods to a CC classroom. David Perkins' "whole game approach" still undergirds my choice of assignment and the kinds of work I expect from even the least prepared and least confident adult learners[2]. Perkins' approach to moving students through critical learning thresholds involves several key moves for introducing new concepts:

- as in Little League baseball, Perkins writes, all students should be playing the "whole game" from the start; **[slide 4]**
- to "make the game worth playing," connect whatever students learn explicitly to the big picture, whatever that picture is; **[slide 5]**
- "work on the hard parts," writes Perkins—integrate writing, practice and self-reflection in the context of the big picture; **[slide 6]**
- play out of town, a suggestion that explicitly highlights the knowledge transfer dimensions of curricular goals; **[slide 7]**
- play the hidden game: in a digital landscape this may be the most important principle to weave through a course, since the algorithmic complexity of our students digital world is almost seamless. Introducing students to tools for revealing the hidden game provides perhaps the most important transferable skill we can give students **[slide 8]**
- learning from the team leverages the social and collaborative aspects of digital life; **[slide 9]**
- and finally, Perkins reminds us to invite students into the game of learning itself—we can encourage students' metacognitive understanding and foster deeper engagement by recognizing prior learning and building on it. **[slide 10]**

As important as this "whole game" approach is, it's incomplete without an equity framework to guide its application. **[slide 11]** For example, one equity principle I apply has to do with working-class time orientation. Orientation toward time is a significant cultural difference across classes. As Skeggs and Wood illustrate, working-class orientation to time is characterized by "precarity," a sense that struggles in and endurance of the present are more salient than

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[2] Perkins, David. *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

deferral and investment in a future imaginary[3]; such a future imaginary characterizes middle-class students' time orientation and supports conventional higher-ed routines and expectations.

Because CC faculty are often so committed to the open-access mission they may be blind to the disconnect between their own intellectual identities and those of their students. **[slide 12]** Michael Warner had an insight about "repronarrativity" that provides a useful equity lens for more fully recognizing this cultural difference between professional educators such as myself and my CC writing students. Repronarrativity, writes Warner, is "…the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession" ("Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet." *Social Text* 29:3-17 1991, p. 7). Because of the repronarrative that drives academic knowledge transmission, it's hard for faculty with advanced degrees to recognize that CC students are not only *not* English majors but are uncertain that they belong in college at all. **[slide 13]**An equity lens on belonging sharpens the recognition that while middle-class intellectual identity involves entitlement to college belonging, working class and minority belonging is more fragile and fraught. Belonging entitlement provides middle-class students with resilience in the face of setbacks such as failure or incomprehension. As Walter and Cohen have demonstrated, students of color, women, and students from lower SES backgrounds experience belonging uncertainty disproportionately. With this equity insight in mind I take care to design assignments that advance understanding of the digital landscape without catapulting underprepared students into self-doubt.

If we don't anticipate this self-doubt, it can escalate into cognitive dissonance and become a barrier to learning. Take the case of threshold concepts. **[slide 14]**Threshold concepts in Writing Studies and digital humanities are valuable aspirational frames for learning. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle have usefully adapted Meyer and Lands' groundbreaking work on "threshold concepts" for Writing Studies; threshold concepts are discipline-specific and can transform students' approach to a subject permanently. **[slide 15]**Once students really understand, for example, that "Words get their meaning from other words" and "Failure can be an important part of writing development," students whole approach to writing practice is permanently transformed. We can look to recent digital humanities scholarship for threshold concepts too: for example "word usage changes over time and this change can tell us something about a culture if we look at large enough samples" (see *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies*, Stanford 2013) or: "the rhetorical canon of invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery has changed with the computer interface and the internet." (Collin Brooke, *Lingua Fracta: Toward a Rhetoric of New Media 2009.)*

These concepts can be revelatory. But in moving students through thresholds in writing and digital methods, learning theorists warn that students can get "stuck" in what they call "liminality." Learning in a liminal state involves a kind of mimicry brought on by cognitive dissonance, where students enact the *surface* features of a new concept while holding onto preconceived ideas and avoiding the transformative understanding of the threshold concept.

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[3] Skeggs, Beverly and Helen Wood. Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Given the saturation of the digital landscape with information, breaking through mimicry to critical understanding is both difficult and essential.[4]

When teaching adult learners in a CC context, there is not a single path through these thresholds. One of the biggest rewards of CC teaching is to work with students who are already highly accomplished—whether as parents of young or grown kids, as active service military or veterans, or seasoned workers in jobs that are now changing. There are also students (and sometimes they are the same students) who are at CC to repair broken lives. Whatever their past, our students bring with them prior learning. But new ideas encountered in a writing class or any classroom can contradict or undermine the value of these students' prior learning, and cognitive dissonance can become a barrier to new understanding. Anticipating this confrontation of prior learning with new knowledge is key to community college students' success.

Going back to Perkins "whole game approach" a good place to end here would be with his conviction that students need to "learn the game of learning." Recently writing studies has emphasized the importance of metacognition and other self-regulatory learning behaviors for success. A couple years ago the WPA published *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. And this framework, too, must be filtered through an equity lens. It outlines habits of mind and ways of approaching writing that assume high levels of what David Conley calls "college knowledge." "College Knowledge" comprises those cognitive strategies and academic behaviors—such as metacognition--that are key facets of college readiness. Such knowledge is explicitly and tacitly reinforced in middle-class households but may elude the more precarious social and economic environments from which CC students emerge.

Applying these equity lenses around belonging uncertainty, around working-class time orientation, around cognitive dissonance and threshold concepts, and around college knowledge helps me to avoid privileged assumptions in course design and curricular expectation. The form this lens takes is varied: I use assignment design and scaffolding, spacious deadlines and cycles of reward/grades, digital engagement through You Tube, Zoom conferences and discussion boards, and especially flexible, low-stakes tasks that build students' literacies in reading and in written and digital compositions. Examples of these assignments are on my blog.

This year I am working on a book whose working title is *In Resilience and In Repair: Digital Humanities, Community Colleges, and the Limits of "Cooling Out."* Community college students are studies in resilience and in repair—of their lives, their records, their recovery, their finances, their intellectual identities. The unique world perspective and life experiences that these students bring to the digital classroom offer an environment where a "global digital humanities" can take shape locally, in communities served by CCs. But the flourishing of digital humanities at community college requires a constant reimagining of our assumptions about how and what these students learn.

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[4] Recently I have become interested in what Stephen Jackson calls "broken world thinking" and the "articulation work" of repairing complex sociotechnical forms. The equity lens insights are mechanisms for curricular repair of invisible privilege in curricula. Jackson, Steven J. "Rethinking Repair," in Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot, eds. Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society. MIT Press: Cambridge MA, 2014.)