

# Collaborative Approaches to the Digital in English Studies

<b>CHAPTER</b>	5
<b>TITLE</b>	Playful Affinity: A Case Study of the Digital Writing and Research Lab as a Collaborative Graduate Student Research Network
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<b>OVERVIEW</b>	This chapter describes how collaborative research networks function by presenting a case study of the Digital Writing and Research Lab, a long-standing research-and-teaching unit dedicated to new media and writing. The authors identify play as a structuring principle that guides collaborative research practices in digital rhetoric and use James Paul Gee's theory of affinity spaces and groups to model how play and gaming principles can be applied to a collective that congregates around a common theme or interest. Since the Lab's research is largely designed and carried out by graduate students, the case study also describes a model of graduate research and professionalization that may be useful to those thinking about the relationship between graduate education, collaboration, and new media.
<b>TAGS</b>	affinity, collaborative, culture, digital, games, graduate, lab, learning, maps, play, project, research, rhetoric, space, students, teaching, work
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## **Playful Affinity: A Case Study of the Digital Writing and Research Lab as a Collaborative Graduate Student Research Network**

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In “Developing Sustainable Research Networks in Graduate Education,” Douglas Eyman, Stephanie Sheffield, and Danielle Nicole DeVoss (2009) acknowledge a core contradiction that faces any graduate student invested in digital rhetoric:

At the graduate level . . . there is a kind of schizophrenic practice enacted—we see, acknowledge, and even study (and research) the innately collaborative process of knowledge construction while simultaneously being assessed as singular authors whose work must maintain the fiction of the originary genius. Explicit collaboration is acceptable in small doses, but the milestones of the graduate educational process—the primary coursework, the portfolio, the comprehensive exam, the dissertation—must always be completed by the individual. (p. 49)

To counteract this irritating state of affairs, Eyman, Sheffield, and DeVoss (2009) suggest balancing newer knowledge practices made possible by digital interfaces with traditional research methods by developing research networks that utilize online collaborative spaces such as blogs. Eyman, Sheffield, and DeVoss present as their case study [DigiRhet.net](#), a research network that grew out of a Digital Rhetorics course at Michigan State University. In their analysis of the practices of DigiRhet.net, the authors argue that collaborative research networks are forged through the development of a community of practice that engages critically with research methods, digital interfaces, and the practical application of research and technological skills. Comprised of professors and graduate students, these networks capitalize on the affordances of both digital and social networks to prepare students of digital rhetoric for the kinds of educational and social practices that are enabled by Web 2.0 technologies. Such practices, Eyman, Sheffield, and DeVoss argue, offer graduate students a working knowledge of digital technologies and collaborative research methodologies that promote productive, critical encounters with technology in digital rhetoric scholarship (pp. 54-55).

In this article, we wish to contribute to the understanding of how collaborative research networks function by presenting a case study of the [Digital Writing and Research Lab](#) (DWRL) at the University of Texas, Austin, a long-standing research-and-teaching unit

dedicated to new media and writing.<sup>1</sup> After spending several years as graduate students teaching and researching at the DWRL, we have experienced how play—what Henry Jenkins (2009) calls, “the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving” (p. 4)—is a crucial aspect of research into digital media and writing. Play has already become a significant conversation in composition studies (Sirc, 2002; Rouzie, 2005). Focusing specifically on one of our research groups from the 2009-2010 academic year, we wish to extend that conversation to think about play as a structuring principle, or metaphor, that guides collaborative research practices in digital rhetoric. James Paul Gee’s theory of affinity spaces and groups (Gee, 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2010) helps us to model how play and gaming principles can be applied to a collective that congregates around a common theme or interest. Since the Lab’s research is largely designed and carried out by graduate students, our case study also describes a model of graduate research and professionalization that may be useful to those thinking about the relationship between graduate education, collaboration, and new media.

## PLAY AS A METAPHOR FOR COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

*I’m offering the flowzone as a model for creative production and collaboration. And I’m suggesting that a space as charged with collaboration and innovation as the CWRL is a flowzone. It says yes to tools. Yes to play. Yes to ideas. It mixes materials. It fixes connections. Trust flows through its circuits. It’s a performance space. A creative space. And the zone doesn’t happen necessarily. It is tuned into being by the blending of its materials, things, projects, and people. And it continues, its currents ongoing, its people swaying and coursing through its collaborations and ideas, even as they flow now. – Daniel Anderson, 2009*

According to its [mission statement](#), the DWRL is “positioned at the intersection of rhetoric, writing, and technology” and “dedicates itself—practically, pedagogically, and theoretically—to the identification and promotion of twenty-first century literacies.” The Lab’s spaces, management practices, research group formations, technological support, hardware and software, and staffing protocols all coalesce to produce the identity of the Lab. Later in this chapter, we will provide a more detailed description of the Lab through a series of videos that offer a sense of the component parts of the Lab and how they are intricately interwoven to support the research and teaching that occurs in the physical and online spaces that we use daily. Even though the research we undertake is dependent on these structures, it is important to emphasize that these structures do not *determine* either our research or our teaching practices. Rather these

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly the Computer Writing and Research Lab (CWRL), “Computer” was replaced with “Digital” to reflect changes in the field and to include Web 2.0 interfaces and digital hand-held devices in the Lab’s research. The Lab’s current director, Diane Davis, explained the name change at the Lab’s [re-christening](#) in the fall of 2009.

structures *support* research and teaching, as we have stated, and they contribute to the professionalization of the graduate students who work in the Lab.

Over the nearly three decades of its existence, the DWRL has honed its structure, teaching methods, and research practices to adapt to a rapidly changing technological environment.<sup>2</sup> In *A New Culture of Learning* (2011), Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown argue that “play reveals a structure of learning that is radically different from the one that most schools or other forms of learning environments provide, and which is well-suited to the notion of a world in flux” (p. 97). From our experience in the DWRL, we have found that play permeates our work culture precisely because a playful attitude enables us to deal with such a “world in flux”: technologies are constantly changing, and we have to adapt our teaching and scholarly practices to keep up.

As Daniel Anderson (2009) claims in the quote at the beginning of this section, the CWRL/DWRL is a creative space that says yes to tools, to ideas, and to play. Play is a partner of work, as Stuart Brown (2009) has suggested:

Though we have been taught that play and work are each the other’s enemy, what I have found is that neither one can thrive without the other. We need [sic] newness of play, its sense of flow, and being in the moment. We need the sense of discovery and liveliness that it provides. We also need the purpose of work, the economic stability it offers, the sense that we are doing service for others, that we are needed and integrated into our world. (p. 126)

Mapping the relationship between work and play is important to our inquiry because while we certainly play in the Lab, our primary reason to be there is most definitely the work of teaching and researching. Before we discuss that work further, we will explore the theoretical foundations of play, which we believe offer insight into how collaborative digital rhetoric research can be productively playful.

John Law (2004) suggests in *After Method*, his masterful re-appraisal of traditional social science research methods, that capturing a social scene in research is a slippery and messy business. If we need to rethink methodological certainty and the possibility of capturing plural realities in single, definitive answers, then, Law suggests, “we’re going to have to train ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways” (p. 2). Law’s call is apposite for those who study digital technologies, as they constantly have to practice, relate, and know in new ways because of the rapidly changing nature

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete understanding of how the Lab evolved, see Slatin, John. (1998). The Computer Writing and Research Lab: A brief institutional history. In Janet Swaffer, Susan Romano, Phillip Markley, & Katherine Arens (Eds.), *Language Learning Online*, (pp. 19 -38). Austin, TX: The Daedalus Group.

of the field. Building on Law's idea that research is a complex process, Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Clay Spinuzzi, Rebecca J. Rickly, and Carole Clark Papper (2008) propose that using an ecological metaphor for research enables us to identify metaphors as intrinsic to research because they "influence our conceptualization of a phenomenon of study and the methods by which we might plan a project to better understand that phenomenon" (p. 4). They argue that an ecological metaphor for writing research creates a harmonious account of "the phenomenon of study, an orientation to research, and an enactment of that orientation in concrete practices" (Fleckenstein et al., 2008, p. 5).

We agree that an ecological metaphor is deeply applicable to the research situation, and ecologies in general have been a very productive lens through which to view the writing process and multimedia writing in particular. But we have found that play is complementary to Fleckenstein and co-authors' (2008) ecological metaphor. What draws us to play as a metaphor for a situated research network such as the DWRL is that, despite the many changes we put into effect each year, we use the same spaces and adhere to similar organizational structures year in and year out. As many gaming and play theorists indicate, a basic characteristic of play is the emergent action that happens around, because of, and even in spite of a structure that enables that play to happen. Our analysis of the Lab indicates that much of the work we produce follows similar patterns: it is highly dependent on the physical and organizational structure of the Lab, but much of the work we develop naturally happens outside of that structure. Although not a methodology in itself, play functions as a useful metaphor by which we can analyze the work in a situated research unit such as the DWRL, and perhaps other kinds of networks as well. Before we discuss how research works in the Lab, we need to take a more careful look at what we mean by play, which Ian Bogost (2007) notes is a tricky concept that is used by many disciplines in many different ways (p. 42).<sup>3</sup> To make sense of such a diverse field of study, we are going to focus on two prominent play theorists, James Paul Gee and Eric Zimmerman, whose different approaches to the topic help us to capture how play circulates in the Lab, while also doing justice to the somewhat indefinable, emergent property that play necessarily includes.

In "Learning and Games," James Paul Gee (2008) suggests that cognitive theories of learning are similar to the principles of game design, such that "good video games recruit good learning and that a game's design is inherently connected to designing

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<sup>3</sup> Composition and rhetoric scholars have long valued the role of play in the writing classroom, and more recently they have been considering what new media can add to writing pedagogy (Huizinga, 2003; Deemer, 1967; Sirc, 2002; Rouzie, 2005). In business, play has been promoted by many as a way to foster creativity and innovation, which are critical to business development (T. Brown, 2008; Robinson, 2006). And in psychology, researchers have found play to be critical for both social and psychological development (S. Brown, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

good learning for players” (p. 21). Gee draws on current learning theory to argue that well-designed games reinforce key learning principles through identity formation, modeling, and feedback. Ultimately, Gee marshals game design and learning theory to propose that deep learning—learning that is successfully transferred to long-term memory—can be facilitated by games because they are virtual experiences that focus on problem-solving, learning, and mastery as forms of pleasure (p. 37).

Gee devises what he calls a “situated learning matrix” to provide a broad set of parameters that enable deep learning to occur through game play. In a situated learning matrix, learning occurs indirectly within a game structure rather than directly, as taught content. To use one of Gee’s examples from his essay “Game-Like Learning” (2008), the computer game *Supercharged!* teaches the principles of electromagnetism “indirectly” by using a simulation where the path of a ship is manipulated by charged particles. This simulation replaces teaching these principles “directly,” using a physics textbook. In a situated learning matrix, players “access” the content of the game by contending with a number of interlocking concepts, which are

- *The development of player identity.* Players learn how to act and interpret actions within the value system of the game to gain
- *Mastery of core skills.* These are the core procedures, and discourses, which players learn by
- *Gaining competency with tools and technologies.* Players choose the tools they need to solve the problem, and these tools mediate player identity and the content of the game in a
- *Goal-driven, problem-solving space.* A play space forms the boundary between the outside world and the game world where players can model different versions of the problem to be solved in a low-stakes environment.

We find much of Gee’s interpretation of game-play and learning principles to be very practical when thinking about how a situated, collaborative teaching-and-research facility like the DWRL operates. Members become part of the Lab by taking on specific identities: teachers in our wired classrooms and project members or leaders. We learn skills and develop research questions using the many digital tools at our disposal. And we model pedagogical uses of technology in workshops and informal tinkering sessions. Finally, all of that work occurs in a number of physical and electronic spaces that enable or constrain the work we do in various ways. Much of our collaborative work happens online in wikis or Google Docs, for example, and our physical classrooms are spaces where we turn our research into teaching practice. These classrooms are also where we run workshops, talks, and other collaborative activities when classes are not in session.

Traditional research in the humanities generally favors work that is performed on one's own using primarily textual sources. Theoretical paradigms that elucidate the workings of collaborative research are important because digital networks provide us with rich opportunities to depart from the traditional humanities model. Gee's "situated learning matrix" is useful for illuminating how identity formation and the interaction between people, tools, and spaces help us to understand how collaborative research using digital tools can work. However, for two reasons, we find that we need to build upon Gee's work to give a full account of how research works in the DWRL.

First, collaborative research in the DWRL does not conform to classic game structure. Certainly, the work we do in the Lab is guided by rules and goals, and players interact in particular online and physical spaces. It is even possible to argue that there is a form of win state, when a project team or individual member successfully completes the goals of a project or teaching assignment. But what we do strays from a classic game structure because it is not always a low-stakes learning activity. Lab members develop tools that they use in the relatively high-stakes environment of the classroom, and they have a responsibility to their team members, to the Lab, and often to collaborating partners outside of the department to deliver a final end-product.

Second, much of our work moves out of what Gee calls modeling toward simulation. Modeling presents the learner or gamer with an opportunity to manipulate a concept without serious real-life consequences.<sup>4</sup> Simulation, on the other hand, has broader implications. A simulation may contain many different models and responds to input from an outside source. For example, in a workshop we may model how to use Google Maps as a writing tool. Instructors then successfully simulate that concept with a class of students, who may have to complete a Google Maps exercise as a graded assignment. Simulations are less controlled and thus raise the expectations of what we do in the modeling phase. Simulations are still somewhat playful in that they are experimental, but they are more serious because there are real consequences at stake for both the instructor, who has to make the exercise pedagogically fruitful, and the students, who are graded on their performance. Since so much of our research occurs in this higher-stakes situation, our work in the Lab breaches the boundaries of modeling and, consequently, the boundaries of low-stakes game activity.

Despite the ways that the work we do departs from a classic game structure, Gee's theory of learning through games is extremely generative because it helps us to theorize a complex research network such as the DWRL. While we acknowledge that

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<sup>4</sup> Play theorist and psychologist Stuart Brown (2008) explains that low-stakes activities are a basic characteristic of play (p. 17). This is also supported by the research of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975), who studies play activities that require considerable time and effort.



such a frame cannot fully encapsulate the Lab's work, game theory can help us to think about how groups of people can work together creatively and productively, and Gee provides researchers from any discipline an excellent grounding to tie those dynamics into solid, applied learning principles. But we would like to push beyond Gee's game structure to think more broadly about play. To do so we turn to Eric Zimmerman. For our purposes, Zimmerman's theory of play is a useful companion to Gee's, as Zimmerman focuses on how play is built upon relationships.

Writing in *First Person* (2004), an influential gaming anthology, Zimmerman argues that, far from being an absolute, definable concept, play can shift depending on context. Three types of play exist, according to Zimmerman: game play, or the formal play of games, which is Gee's focus; ludic or informal play, such as friends tossing around a Frisbee or dogs chasing each other (in other words, activity that is play without a win-state formation); and, finally, being playful, which Zimmerman glosses as "a state where you are not necessarily playing," but rather "injecting a spirit of play into some other action" (p. 158). From these three categories, Zimmerman theorizes play as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and despite the more rigid structures of a system" (p. 158). By Zimmerman's reckoning, the products of play within a system happen because the system is in place, but also, in what seems like a paradox, in spite of it. Zimmerman's definition of play complements Gee's discussion in that play operates within a system by having actors following rules, collaborating, and interacting in a structured or formal manner. But where Gee sees the structure of the game determining the productive outcomes of play, Zimmerman suggests that those outcomes also exceed that structure. As Zimmerman explains,

even though play only occurs because of these structures, the play is also exactly the thing that exists despite the system, the free movement within it, in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play exists in opposition to the structures it inhabits, at odds with the utilitarian functioning of the system. (p. 159)

This formulation shifts from the game to focus on the network where elements of that system interact with each other. Play is thus determined by a structure *and* the relationships that develop within that structure. It is both guided by predetermined goals *and* the emergent goals that are produced by the network; it is necessarily structured *and* fluid.

By using a definition of play that describes its relationship to structure as oppositional, we are not suggesting that the DWRL administration willfully lets the project groups ignore the parameters of either the goals of the projects or the structure of the Lab. Quite the opposite: Those structures are the conditions of possibility for research to

occur in the first place. Beyond the formal structures of the Lab, however, we suggest that an important function of the research undertaken in the DWRL is a consequence of the playful, emergent relationships among the elements that constitute our research network. It is part of the function of the Lab to both preserve the structures that enable and ensure the continuation of the network, while also being sensitive to emergent patterns and trends, taking them into account, and adjusting accordingly. This is why we find play to be such a useful metaphor for describing the Lab's work; under Zimmerman's definition, play values both structure and change.

To accurately take into account how research is produced in the DWRL, our definition of play agrees with much of Gee's game-based research, with its focus on deep learning through the cultivation of player identity within the ecology of the game, using tools to mediate between players and content, and modeling scenarios in order to solve problems. Such a lens offers us a way to describe how a collaborative structure works to create a strong learning (and researching and teaching) environment. However, our definition also acknowledges that a research network is not an out-of-the-box structure like a video game. It depends and thrives on goals that are negotiated and renegotiated through the relationships among participants, the tools they use, the spaces they frequent, and the discourses that circulate within their disciplinary parameters. As Zimmerman (2004) advises, "the real trick is that the designed structure can guide and engender play, but never completely script it in advance" (p. 160).

## **AFFINITY SPACES**

Of all of Gee's models of game-based learning, we find his theory of affinity spaces to be the most applicable to a research collective such as the DWRL. Gee characterizes affinity spaces as places of learning where people interested in or "passionate" about learning particular topics congregate. An affinity space may be physical or virtual, or a mixture of the two. Gee draws largely from gaming culture to build his theory of affinity: he uses studies of gamers in the online multiplayer games *Age of Mythology* and more recently *The Sims* to explain the structures of affinity. Affinity spaces tend to occur in informal spaces, outside traditional learning institutions, but their structure can be applied to educational settings (Gee, 2007, p. 90).

As Gee suggests, affinity as an organizing principle focuses on "the idea of a space in which people interact, rather than on membership in a community" (2007, p. 87). People who populate affinity spaces are drawn to them by a desire to pursue the kind of knowledge that organizes that affinity space. Participation in affinity spaces is thus fluid, as people will move in and out of the space according to their level of interest in the topic. Gee postulates that there are problems with structuring collaborative activity around groups of people, such as a community. He argues that community as an

organizing principle carries with it connotations of “belongingness” and “membership” that make it difficult to parse what may constitute a community and what may not. Consequently, thinking of collectives in terms of the content that brings them together is a more revealing way of theorizing how people organize and collaborate.

There are several defining characteristics of an affinity space. First, it requires some sort of space—physical, virtual, or a mixture of both—where members can participate. It requires content, what Gee calls “generators” that produce the content, and “portals” through which that content is accessed. Beyond these three basic requirements, Gee outlines a series of attributes that may also define an affinity space:

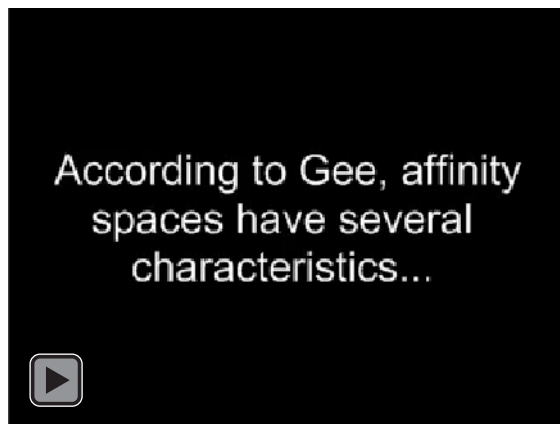
- People gather around an affinity space in order to pursue a common endeavor;
- Novices and experts share the space;
- Portals can be generators—or producers—of content;
- Content organization is transformed by interactional organization;
- The space requires intensive and extensive knowledge;
- The space enables people to use dispersed knowledge;
- Using tacit knowledge, knowledge that is brought to the topic from experience, is encouraged;
- There are many different forms and routes of participation in an affinity space;
- Leadership in the affinity space is porous.

## **PLAYFUL AFFINITY IN CONTEXT, PART 1: SPACES, PEOPLE, AND TOOLS IN THE DWRL**

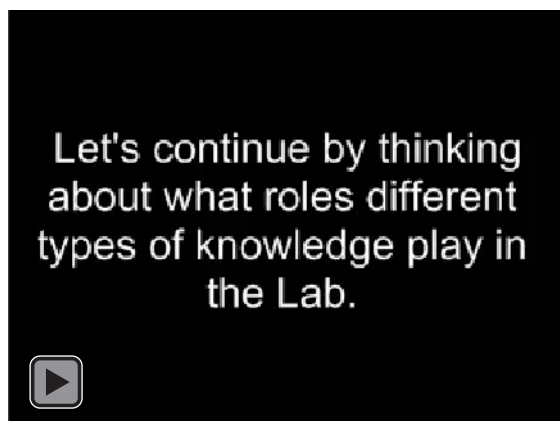
In the DWRL, up to forty graduate students from a number of disciplines teach in our five networked classrooms and contribute to an average of four research projects that we run every year. The Lab is overseen by a faculty member (currently Diane Davis) and we have two full-time staff members: a program coordinator (Stephanie Stickney) who coordinates staffing and research, and a systems administrator (Hampton Finger) who manages the dual-boot Macs that populate our classrooms, the software we use, and our own servers, upon which we can test beta software and house projects separately from the main UT servers.

The staffing structure of the Lab is one of its unique features. Unlike many research collectives (which tend to be voluntary), graduate students at the DWRL are paid for their efforts as part of a twenty-hour work week. Instructors are apportioned thirteen hours of their time to dedicate to their teaching, and a further seven hours to work in the Lab. Within those seven hours, instructors divide their time between proctoring for our various classrooms, facilitating open labs, and contributing to research projects. Staffing consists of maintaining the equipment in the classrooms and being available for

technical consultation for professors and students who are having difficulty with the equipment. This workload can change depending on the role assigned to the instructor. For example, as a project leader, the seven hours dedicated to Lab work per week are aimed at making the project run and managing the various project members. We also have specialists exterior to the project groups who are “go-to” people for various important services such as accessibility issues or consulting on how to use Drupal (our content management system). Also, three students fill assistant director positions, where they work closely with the program coordinator, faculty advisor, and systems administrator. In this short, informal video, people who work in the Lab describe their duties and the staffing structure that supports both our classroom activities and our collaborative research agendas:



Gee tells us that in an affinity space, people bond “first and foremost around an endeavor or interest” (2007, p. 98). Experience, skill level, and even disciplinary focus are all secondary to the affinity to a particular inquiry, which in the case of the DWRL is the broad interdisciplinary potential of digital literacies. In the video that follows, Lab members describe their backgrounds and investments in the DWRL and how the space both structures the work they do and presents them opportunities to extend their own research:



As collaborative digital technologies become more firmly embedded in the culture that surrounds us, our work becomes increasingly invested in collaborative endeavors that are enhanced by digital writing environments. The Web sites, blogs, wikis, and media sharing sites become, to use Gee's affinity space theory, portals through which we access content and generators of new research. Here are some of the ways that digital environments are both a point of access and generators of graduate student research in the DWRL:

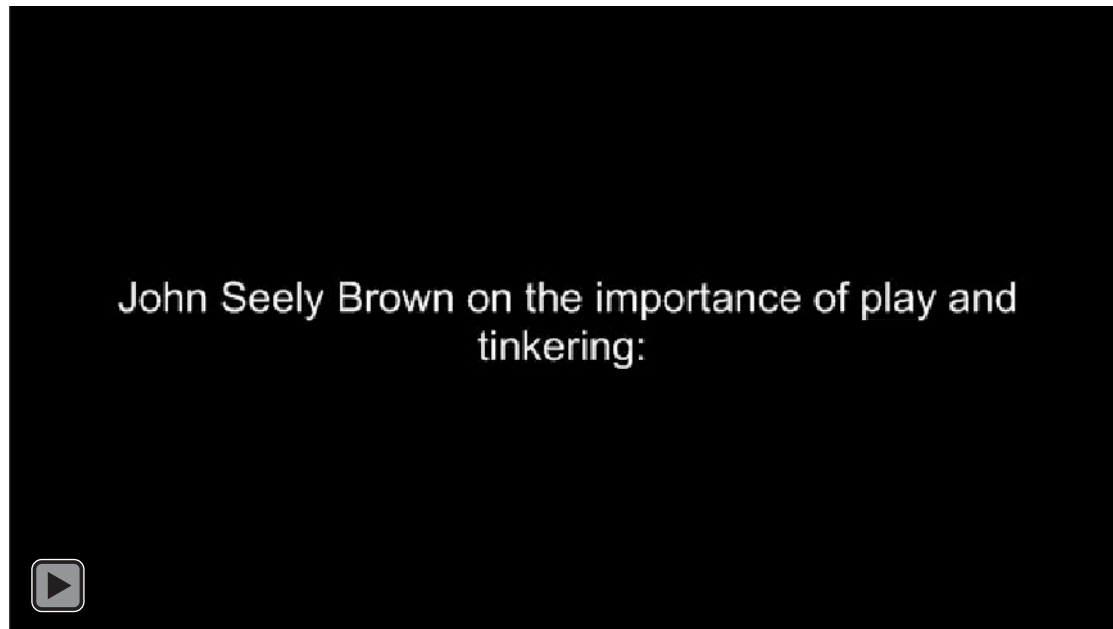


See [Appendix A](#) for transcripts of all videos included in this chapter.

## **PLAYFUL AFFINITY IN CONTEXT, PART 2: THE ROLE OF PLAY AND TINKERING IN A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT**

Viewing the DWRL as an affinity space gives us a snapshot of how the spaces, people, and tools in the Lab interact on a daily basis. But how do these interactions lead to specific research questions and projects? To answer this, we will focus on one of our more recent research groups, [Geo-Everything](#).

The video below tracks how geotechnologies circulated around the Lab and in particular how various members tinkered with GoogleMaps in their classroom practices. Playful tinkering is a core aspect of how a technology is introduced and developed in the DWRL research culture.



*John Seely Brown clip used with permission from producer Stephen Brown, The Pearson Foundation. Music by [duckett](#).*

If we look carefully at how geotechnologies have circulated in the Lab in this video, we can discern playful patterns of engagement, teaching, and research. The Geo-Everything project demonstrates how a research agenda can develop and change over time in the DWRL. The wired classrooms and project groups that the Lab supports provide a context for individual instructors to tinker with various technologies, model how they may work in a class, apply them to the various types of content they teach, and simulate exercises using those technologies in their classes. If a classroom experiment proves fruitful, the Lab provides spaces and administrative support for workshops to take place around that technology and equipment to record the workshops. Instructors have the opportunity to write up their findings in the form of blog posts, lesson plans, white papers, and video recordings that are published to the DWRL Web site and blogs. The Lab carefully monitors the success of particular technologies through word of mouth and end-of-year interviews with all Lab participants. Based on these findings, the Lab administration may choose to form a more formal research group around that technology, buy the technological requirements that will enable further research, and support collaborative research around that tool, including funding for conferences. Collaborative work is encouraged through structured meetings and access to Lab spaces, equipment, and funds to push understanding of that tool or concept even further.

All the principles of learning through game play that Gee advocates are also evident in the video. Lab members variously adopt the identities of teachers, team members, and researchers; they model concepts that are structured around the goals and expectations

of their classes and projects; they learn how to use new tools and apply their emerging conceptual understanding and skills to various types of content that are congruent with their pedagogical and research aims. What happens in the Lab can be read across all of the elements of Gee's situated learning matrix that supports deep learning through games. Yet, what happens at the Lab also departs from Gee's conceptual model. The strict order of work that Gee advocates is scrambled by the Lab's inherently emergent processes and goals and leans toward Zimmerman's more fluid concept of play in action. All of the above processes are not determined by the rules of a game per se, but instead emerge through an intricate web of negotiations and relationships. Instructors play with tools on their own, try them out in their classes, and communicate with their peers and the Lab administration in a variety of ways: online, in informal interactions around the Lab, in workshop presentations, at happy hours at local watering holes, and in formal white papers and publications. The Lab responds by creating the formal structure of a project group where further sustained research takes place. There is play even within that formal structure. Project groups are encouraged to negotiate between the broad aims of the project and the specific identities and needs of the individual group members. In other words, the structure is there to support the emerging character of the research, not to define it. The research produced at the DWRL is a negotiation among the structure put in place to support the research; the interactions among the people involved, the tools they use, and the research strategies they employ; and the Lab's physical and virtual spaces they frequent.

Tinkering has so inhabited the methods of the Lab that it has begun to colonize space too. During the spring of 2010, Lab members began to meet informally in one of the five DWRL classrooms on Friday afternoons, when classes were finished for the week. Graduate instructors used this time to play with new software and share ideas. We coined the term "[Open Lab Fridays](#)" to describe this phenomenon, and the explicitly playful space and time that characterizes Open Lab has taken firm root within the overall week-to-week operations of the collective. Building upon feedback from instructors who enjoyed having the time to experiment, the administration has since formalized play time and space in the Lab by hosting Open Lab Fridays at least twice a month. The Open Lab helps sow the seeds of new collaborative research opportunities, introduce new concepts and tools into our work/play flow, and enhance what we see as the generative, exciting, and above all fun dynamic of our collective work.

The emergence of the physical play space of Open Lab Fridays is complemented by our increasingly intensive use of wikis to coordinate projects and share ideas and resources. All of the project groups share a wiki space to upload resources, publish meeting minutes, coordinate projects with greater ease, and keep up to date on the progress of other groups. We are also using this wiki to develop a bibliography of materials related to what we consider "core conversations" in digital rhetoric and

humanities research. This crowd-sourced bibliography will help Lab members augment research they are already doing in their classes and dissertation work and help them become conversant in key areas of digital scholarship that may not be the primary focus of their own research. Such collaborative resource building via wiki-tinkering strengthens the connection between the playful research techniques being used in the Lab and the structure that is there to both facilitate and solidify those approaches.

## **CONCLUSION**

We acknowledge that the constant negotiation between play and structure in the Lab does not always translate directly into what is traditionally accepted by the academy as research—the solo-authored, print-based journal articles and book chapters favored by humanities disciplines. We do agree, however, with Selfe, Hawisher, and Berry (2009) that collaborative techniques can create a sense of continuity so that English departments can retain the value they place “on scholarship that is original, innovative, intellectual, and sustained, peer-reviewed and published, while acknowledging that scholarly fields, forms, and values change” (p. 2). The Lab is experimenting with the change in fields, forms, and values that we see going on around us every day. As Selfe, Hawisher, and Berry argue, scholarly modes of production are not fixed; they are “technologically shaped and contingent” and can “increasingly employ multiple semiotic modalities (words, still and moving images, video, audio) to convey meaning in increasingly effective and robust ways” (p. 2). These multiple semiotic modalities require a restructuring of not only the texts we write but also of the entire process of research. The playful methodologies we support in the Lab correspond to the larger project of rethinking how we research and publish in the field of digital rhetoric.

Such changes do not occur overnight, of course, and they are not possible without both careful and playful exploration. This is the work a graduate research unit can contribute to the rapidly shifting terrain of academic research. We believe that our model at the DWRL responds quickly and effectively to emerging techniques, that it is research that is firmly rooted in both theory and practice, and, above all, that the Lab carefully attends to the messy playfulness that characterizes collaborative work. Because a research collective is influenced so heavily by particular institutional patterns and constraints, we do not suggest that the model we have at the Lab will perfectly fit in every instance. But by focusing so tightly on play as a structuring principle in this chapter, we hope to have clearly articulated the generative potential it holds for the collaborative work environment and research/teaching output of any graduate student cohort.

These snapshots of the DWRL’s research culture reveal that playful experimentation is absolutely central to our development as scholar-teachers. The work we do in DWRL classrooms and on collaborative research projects enhances other aspects of our



graduate training, offering in-depth and applied experience with writing and research in digital environments. What we do in our graduate courses and during the dissertation writing process is certainly vital to our entry into the field of rhetoric and composition. But the playful experimentation that we undertake in the DWRL is equally important because it prepares us to deal with the pervasive digital culture that will shape our careers as educators and researchers. Some sort of collaborative student research network is both a desirable and necessary component of graduate education and professionalization in a digital age. It is our hope that other programs—and the emerging scholars who will sustain those programs in the future—will use playful affinity as a tool to imaginatively remix their own work, if not the discipline itself.

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## **APPENDIX A: VIDEO TRANSCRIPTS**

### **Video 1**

Stephanie: Because I am a member of the lab, I get to teach in one of the lab classrooms. Those classrooms have a computer for every student, scanner, printer, projector. They are very high tech. Students are very engaged in technology.

Pearl: Mostly everyone is both an instructor in the English or Rhetoric departments but then also have a joint appointment in the DWRL. Through that appointment they both get to teach that class they are the instructor for in the computer classroom and then also work on research teams in the DWRL on various topics.

Stephanie: Everyone who works in the lab is either a specialist or a project member or an AD.

Pearl: There are various roles that one can have in the lab. You can be a project leader, in which case one would be proctoring the lab but one would have a more managerial role in terms of organizing the project, deciding the direction of the project, and organizing the group's members and things like that, which is the role that I had last year. Then one can also be a member of a project group in which one basically contributes to the group as well as proctoring in the lab and teaching your own class.

Unidentified speaker: I am proctoring. As a proctor I oversee the needs of DWRL's computer labs and their classrooms. I help instructors with technology issues. I help students who need help in the lab.

Molly: The whole idea is that when you are an instructor in the lab classroom, you want your time to be spent with the students, not with the technology. So if there are any glitches or anything that is puzzling you just come to the proctor.

Stephanie: Instead of being a member of one of our ongoing research projects this year, I chose to be an accessibility specialist. So that means that I don't dedicate my extra hours to a research project instead I dedicate it to my own research on accessibility and making that information available to the rest of us.

Unidentified speaker: We have a bunch of assistant directors, ADs, whose job it is I guess to sort of manage all projects that go on in the lab.

Unidentified speaker: They are a support system for us. As project members and project leaders, they're helping to direct the sort of overall trajectory of what the lab wants to do in the coming years. Things like planning orientations, deciding where we can have a presence, what the new research groups will be.

## **Video 2**

Chris: This is my first year working in the lab.

Trevor: This is the end of my second year in the lab.

Molly: This is my fourth year.

Unidentified speaker: This is my second year.

Molly: I study the eighteenth-century transatlantic book trade.

Unidentified speaker: I am interested in the intersection of audio recording and writing.

Unidentified speaker: Imperialism and the British literary canon.

Unidentified speaker: Environmental rhetoric and space and place rhetorics.

Unidentified speaker: So the lab has affected my research in that I do now social studies research which I did not do before working in the lab.

I'm project leader for VIZ or the Visual Rhetoric workgroup and I now I do research studies about visual literacy and then that connects back to my research for my dissertation which is Renaissance poetry and I also talk about the relation of poetry and visual culture in the sixteenth century. So it has kind of reversed back to my primary research for my dissertation.

Stephanie: Thinking through issues of accessibility is interesting for me. Like thinking about ways in which texts were distributed and articles and books were published in the nineteenth century, but I am not quite sure yet how that all adds up though. But certainly, the work that I've done here has made me think about my own work differently.

Chris: And so contributing to the immersive environments has been a big . . . has been a resource for me to learn more about games and game design and games and pedagogy and I have done a lot of research, more research than I would have done otherwise, to be a part of that group. I think I may have been able to contribute as well because I like games and . . . have ideas about how to use games. And also this semester I got a chance to develop a lesson plan in which I used a game called Mass Effect in the classroom to teach some rhetorical skills. Then I was asked to give a workshop for the other AIs in the department about how my lesson plan worked and how they might want to use video games in the classroom too. So that was really exciting because I had never given a workshop presentation on how to use video games in the classroom and that was a great opportunity for me to do that amongst my peers who could give me constructive feedback on the presentation and my ideas.

Molly: I mean one way that I can think about my research because I study the book trade in the eighteenth century is to think about the history of writing technology. So, I think a lot about the rhetoric around the print trade and the metaphors used to describe print in the eighteenth century. So in some sense the real resonance is with the conversations going on in the lab because people are studying the rhetoric of the current media revolution or whatever you want to call it, the moment that we are in.

Trevor: I work at the intersections of rhetorical theory and continental philosophy. As such I am also interested in writing theory and things like that but my dissertation itself is on the rhetoric of memory and forgetting. It's definitely is a very theory heavy . . . I don't know how to put it. It's a huge, philosophically laden project, I guess.

### **Video 3**

Unidentified speaker: Hello.

Interviewer: How's it going?

Unidentified speaker: It's going well and yourself?

Interviewer: What do you guys usually do in here?

Unidentified speaker: I usually prep for class. And I love this computer; you can get so many screens on the page at once. I work on papers in here. I work with my immersive environments group in here because it's got Photoshop and stuff that I've used for that.

Interviewer: Okay. Cool.

Unidentified speaker: We are in one of the lab classrooms for an open lab. It's a Friday afternoon.

Interviewer: And what do we do in open lab?

Unidentified speaker: Well people can work on various projects. I'm going to work on my 4Cs presentation, which was about social tagging and visual literacy. I'm going to host it on the Viz page as a three-page.

Kevin: I've been thinking a lot about the geography of the lab and how it operates as a space. And I especially like that in the same space you are teaching and then you are also developing skills sets . . . I talk to the ADs. I talk to Hampton. I brainstorm about kinds of technologies I'd like to bring into the classroom. So the support and the pedagogical training are happening in the same location which has been really, really helpful.

Amanda: I am in the stage of my research writing where I am studying for the field exam. So I am reading a lot of books, but honestly I feel like more of my knowledge of the digital humanities, and that's my field, basically has come from being in the DWRL than it has from reading books.

Molly: They come from kind of all spaces. They come from just interests that people have. People in the lab start getting interested in Google Maps or something like that. At the end of the year a number of us nominate ourselves for the Slatin Award, which is a mastery of technology in the classroom, electronic media in the classroom, award . . . but anyhow at that time often ADs will get ideas for, gee, this is a really cool thing that someone is doing in their classroom and we should all be doing that.

Molly: You know another example would be that the Blanton Museum comes and says . . . we start making connections with them and they kind of have an idea for a project. So then we kind of form a project group. I mean we have Viz already, but the nature of what Viz does has changed a lot because of that connection with the Blanton. Sometimes there within the lab, people will come up with groups with what people are doing, what people are getting involved in, and sometimes groups are formed by outside connections. All this kind of gets consolidated in the summer by the assistant directors who work during the summer.

#### **Video 4**

John Seely Brown: I think the construct that has been most overlooked now in the twenty-first century and maybe the twentieth century, as well, is the power and importance of play. That is to say, how do I take an idea and how do I kind of play with it? How do I tinker with it? How do I come to make it personal? How do I come to own it? How do I dwell in the idea itself?

Lauren: In order to help visualize both how tinkering with Google Maps happened in the lab, and how it eventually led to the formulation of the GeoEverything project group, I've created a timeline of the research on Google Maps in the DWRL.

The map begins in early 2007 and continues through when the project occurred during the 2009-2010 school year and up to the present day. Each event in the timeline is linked to a lesson plan, blog-post, map—some evidence of the research that was happening. I'd also like to point out that this timeline is by no means exhaustive, but it gives us a glimpse of our research in this particular area.

So let's zoom in and take a closer look at the timeline. Research on pedagogical uses of Google Maps in the writing classrooms in the DWRL was pioneered by Jim Brown, a former assistant director of the lab, so the timeline begins in early 2007 with two of his Blogging Pedagogy posts on how Google Maps might be useful in helping students map

ideas or novels. The ideas in Jim's blog posts eventually developed into the workshop that he gave at the 2007 DWRL orientation on using Google Maps in the classroom. We consider this workshop to be pivotal in the lab's research on Google Maps because it sparked interest in the tool amongst lab members and caused many different people to begin thinking about and experimenting with the tool.

So returning to the timeline, looking at the fall and spring semesters after Jim's workshop, here's a map that a lab member created for use as an in-class teaching tool. Here's a lesson plan about having students build arguments into maps. Here's an example of a student-created argumentative map that resulted from that lesson plan. This is a blog post where I began to think about Google Maps theoretically in terms of surveillance. And here's another lesson plan by Jim Brown that he did in the fall of 2008, where he uses Google Maps to help students map home based on Gregory Ulner's *Internet Invention*.

So, returning to the timeline again, we come to the publication of the 2009 *Horizon Report*, which bolstered all this work on Google Maps. The report included a section called "GeoEverything" and this section became both the name and the inspiration for the project group.

That spring, my co-author, Sean McCarthy, gave a second workshop on Google Maps, which built upon Jim's workshop and Sean's experiments in the classroom and argued that Google Maps could be used as a writing tool to help students build arguments. Sean's work with Google Maps continued in his classroom that semester where he had his students create maps for local Austin non-profits. This is a map of social services available in Austin that Sean's students made for the Austin homeless resource, Front Steps.

In the summer of 2009, based upon all this tinkering with Google Maps, and the *Horizon Report*, the GeoEverything project was created. The next several events represent the work that the group did throughout the 2009-2010 school year, which included various lesson plans, blog posts, maps created by both students and instructors, a workshop about using Google Earth in the classroom and, finally, a white paper that consolidated the results of their research.

The last few events in my timeline represent how the work of GeoEverything has continued beyond the project group as instructors have adapted Google Maps and Google Earth to their particular courses and to consider the theoretical or cultural implications of Google Maps on the blogs.

Collaborative research in the DWRL happens through interactions that are represented by these kinds of publications that live on the lab's Web site, blogs, and outside



resources. As John Seely Brown says, lab members remix, reuse, and build upon previous ideas and lesson plans and make the tool their own. This is how we tinker.