

The Nearness of You: A Response to “Authors / Authority” in *The New Work of Composing*

Andrea A. Lunsford
Stanford University

I’ve been sitting at my computer, communing with *The New Work of Composing*, and especially with the authors of the cluster on Authors and Authority. I lean away from the desk to look out my office window at the tiled roofs, the palm trees, the blue sky stretching up from golden hills. And then I lean into memories—of learning to write and read, of attempts at “authoring” and achieving some sense of authority, of that core technology that is writing and of all the technologies that have accompanied it, like handmaidens to its tasks. And I give myself up to the chorus of voices that fill these memories: I hear my mother reading from A. A. Milne’s “Now We Are Six,” my grandmother telling homespun stories while my grandfather played banjo, my teachers reprimanding me for reading *Nancy Drew* books, the writers whose words are woven into every part of me—what Eudora Welty called “a sweet devouring.” And now the voices and images that converge in these texts, that echo and ricochet around my office, invite me to join in what feels like an afternoon gathering with old and trusted and respected friends.

It’s not the pale moon that excites me

That thrills and delights me, oh no

It’s just the nearness of you.

I need no soft lights to enchant me . . .

I feel as if I’ve been waiting for this “born digital” scholarly book for at least thirty years. In fact, it’s been almost *exactly* thirty years since Lisa Ede and I began to question traditional understandings of authorship and authority, first in a FIPSE grant proposal to study the phenomenon of collaborative writing and then in one of our earliest co-written essays, “Why Write . . . Together?”

. . . the issue of co- and group-authorship in general is not of limited or peripheral significance. As a rule, writers in the humanities have tended to ignore co-authorship, both in writing and in teaching, while colleagues in the science and the professions have long used it as a major mode. In view of this anomaly, the images of the lonely writer in a garret, or students hunched against the solitary ordeal of writing proficiency examinations, seem inappropriate. We are, after all, most often responsible for teaching those who go into science and the professions. And when we consider that these students are going into jobs already making use of rapidly developing computer technology, which holds such potential significance for co-authoring, the question for both writers and teachers may be not “Why write together?” but Why not write together?” (1983, p. 33)

By a happy coincidence, as I was in the midst of reading the pieces in this section of *The New Work*, I received an advanced copy of Lisa’s and my latest publication, a collection of our previously published work and five new essays entitled *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice*. The first essay in the volume, “Why Write Together?” is now accompanied by a number of other essays, each one exploring the changing face(s) of authorship and the way such changes paralleled changes in writing and reading as well as in the terms of the rhetorical triangle: over the years, we saw

dramatically how “text,” “writer,” and “audience” shifted, merged, changed places, shifted again. The most recently composed essay in this collection, our “‘Among the Audience’: On Audience in an Age of New Literacies,” we argue that

We must help our students learn to conceive and produce a repertoire of text, from the convincing academic argument to the compelling webtext or memorable audio essay. (2012, pp. 249-50)

As we put together this collection of our essays, we were painfully aware that we were not practicing what we preached: While we added photos and images and created a worldle based on our five new essays, *Writing Together* is still a resolutely print text, grounded and limited in the way that print texts are. Throughout thirty years of scholarly work, we have been documenting the changes to literacy without inhabiting or embodying those changes—and we have known and regretted that fact.

How perfectly wonderful, then, to enter the portal of *The New Work of Composing*, to engage Debra Journet, Cheryl Ball, and Ryan Trauman’s introduction, with its (to me) thrilling words that “As new media have created new communicative possibilities” (yes, those Lisa and I were trying to imagine thirty years ago) “we have, concomitantly, changed our understanding of what it means to be an author.” The editors of this digital text now join a growing group of scholars in tracking the new possibilities of authorship and authority—and they have done so in a text that exists “at a nexus between established and new ways of defining scholarly book-length projects,” one that in this case includes video and audio clips, images of many kinds, embedded Prezis, and much, much more. In short, they have produced what they describe as “one of the earliest examples of a born-digital scholarly book,” and I as a reader/viewer/participant thank them for publishing what just a couple of years ago would have been regarded not only as daring and courageous (which it is) but as a dead-end, especially in terms of tenure and promotion and prestige.

This book shows how benighted such an assessment is today. And the pieces in the Author/Authority section go on to demonstrate how valuable and viable is the kind of scholarship that is “born digital.” In “Politicizing, Placing, and Performing Narratives of Gentrification in an Urban Community,” Valerie Kinloch and the young people she works and composes with show how the use of new media and new literacy strategies can draw attention to, critique, and provide alternatives to changes to their neighborhoods. Capturing the “gentrification” of their community on their cameras and in their words, they document these changes and insert themselves into the dialogue surrounding them. These students are the new authors, taking control and working together to gain and share authority, to become participants rather than bystanders, and thus to shape their own lives.

Cheryl Ball’s students (The Normal Group!) echo this same motif: Today’s authors are active participants, makers of knowledge and content rather than passive receivers. In “Talking Back to Teachers” they train their intelligence (along with their cameras and recorders) at participants in the 2008 Watson Conference, creating four fascinating multimedia “takes” on the conference and, along the way, showing us how to craft a nonlinear, digital, web-based argument about the nature and function of digital writing/scholarship. In “Not Your Mother’s Argument,” Morgan Gresham and Roxanne Aftanas take their own slant on academic argument, resisting the traditional straitjacket of agonistic, winner-take-all discourse that has long dominated in the academy and producing, instead, a multivocal, multimediated meditation showing us what an invitational argument (Foss and Foss and Griffin’s term) can look like. As I entered the spaces of this argument, reveling in Gresham and Aftanas’s collaboration as well as the way they drew me in, welcomed me, made me part of the

scene, I kept saying “Brava!” and thinking of the group of women a colleague calls her Ph.Divas. Indeed!

In “Mothers and Daughters of Digital Invention,” Danielle DeVoss reprises Autumn Stanley’s 1995 *Mothers and Daughters of Invention* and uses that discussion as a way into an exploration of how historical practices have disenfranchised women and kept them outside intellectual property regimes. But DeVoss also shows how women

are using intellectual property systems to protect their work and how they are subverting intellectual property systems as part of their work—how women are deliberately, explicitly inverting the intellectual property regime to foster more collaboration and sharing.

My own research with college-age students (among some men as well as women) corroborates what DeVoss says about new concepts of intellectual property emerging, and it also corroborates her acute sense of the dangers that can exist in wide open spaces. DeVoss is certainly no Pollyanna: But while she is aware of challenge and even dangers, her webtext is upbeat, showing “how women are rewriting intellectual property; how feminists are entering into the landscape of copyright control; and, importantly, what we can learn from their interventions.”

By the time I had romped about in these texts for a happy two or three days, I was feeling more optimistic about the future of rhetoric and writing studies than I have been in a long time. And then when I engaged Devon Fitzgerald Ralston’s “Where Ya At: Composing Identity through Hyperlocal Narrative,” I felt like jumping for joy. Heck, I DID jump for joy, dancing around my office and trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to click my heels. But unlike Dorothy, I didn’t want to go back to Kansas—unless by “Kansas” I could mean the kind of hyperlocality/ies that Ralston builds here. Engaged by her meditations on important places (her grandmother’s kitchen, her blog, her social media neighborhoods—ultimately her explication of what it means to understand that we “are different people in different places” and the degree to which this fact of life is complicated by our technologies—I didn’t so much read this piece as I floated in and with it, experiencing it as just the kind of invitational argument Gresham and Aftanas invoke, as an elegant “talking back to teachers” that the Normal Group embody, as a resistance to traditional notions of intellectual property that DeVoss documents, and as an exploration of identity-forming activities demonstrated by Khaleeq and Phillip in Kinloch’s essay on performing narratives. I was one happy reader.

Together, these digital texts do what Lisa and I could not do in our earlier work: talk the talk AND walk the walk; they practice what they preach; they are what they say and do. Over and over again, they demonstrate new ways of being “authors,” new ways of establishing and using authority. And without ignoring challenges and pitfalls ahead, they underscore throughout what seems to me to be the most profound change to literacy in our time: We have, they demonstrate eloquently and often poignantly, moved from an age of consumption (think traditional readers of traditional print text; think passive receivers of information) to an age of production—of participation, of action, of doing, of how my students now define “good writing,” as “writing that makes something happen in the world.”

These texts have certainly made something happen in my world, and as I read through what I’ve written I note how “active” I have been: I am dancing, romping, clicking heels, ricocheting, entering, floating, engaging, being in and with these texts in all the ways I can be, enjoying, as I said earlier, an afternoon gathering with old and trusted and respected friends. The *technological* nearness of you, and you. . . .

References

Ede, Lisa, & Lunsford, Andrea. (1983). Why write... together? *Rhetoric Review*, 1(2), 150-157.

Lunsford, Andrea, & Ede, Lisa. (2012). *Writing together: Collaboration in theory and practice*. Boston, MA: Bedford-St. Martins.

Nearness of you [Lyrics].