

A Response to Monique Shetayh

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Throughout the article “Wrapped Up in the Online World: Technology, Communication, Blogging, and Youth Today,” Monique Shetayh argues that our cyber-centric world would benefit from incorporating online social networking and blogging in a classroom setting. Through two examples of recreational blogs, Shetayh illustrates how blogs and social networks allow users to engage in rhetorical experiences that nurture an “authentic, constructive, and motivational” approach to writing (85).

While I agree that blogs and social networking sites can be great tools for sophisticated dialectical inquiry and self-expression, I fear that Shetayh ignores the slimy underbelly of the Internet. Trolls¹ and cyber bullies lurk in all corners of blog websites, and I fear an excess of their abuse can destroy a student’s rhetorical growth. One of Shetayh’s sample blogs comes from a third grade classroom, implying that she believes children should begin using blogs as young as eight or nine. While I believe blogs are great tools for mature users, I highly doubt that young children will be able to grow rhetorically confident through their use: children will be prone to make mistakes while using blogs, and they will face a world of critics eager to tear their work apart. Cyber bullying is an increasing problem for youth, and it is likely to pose a serious hindrance to rhetorical learning. We must also consider the voice of an online writer, and explore how an excess of both destructive and constructive criticism may destroy a writer’s expression of individuality. Lastly, I question the practicality of Shetayh’s goals of reproducing the enthusiasm of recreational writing in the classroom.

In 2007, Debbie Heimowits, a Stanford University master’s student, found through accredited research that 60% of students had experienced instances of online bullying. The primary websites where this cyber bullying occurred were social networking and blog websites (Snyder). In Shetayh’s first sample blog, a responder harshly criticizes the use of the blogger’s elevated language.

Lately, I’ve been realizing that I don’t want to write like this anymore. I mean, I try and certainly can. But anymore, the act of overcomplicating things just pisses me off. Maybe it takes skill, and I should flaunt my ability, but I just feel like a stuck up prick whenever I do it. (88)

In his speech, we are able to see the immense peer pressure placed on the online writer. The blogger is unable to express how he feels without being indirectly called a “stuck up prick” for writing eloquently. In “The Role of Speech in Liberal Education,” Elbert Harrington stresses the importance of developing “poise, confidence, and purpose” as well as pursuing “self-discovery” while learning speech and rhetoric. Bullying of any kind can destroy poise, self-confidence, and

even purpose in a student's development. By placing blogs and social networks at the center of rhetorical learning, Shetayh puts Harrington's ideals at risk.

Even an overdose of fair constructive criticism can hurt a child's development because it removes the self-discovery aspect of learning. Especially in early development, it is crucial for teachers to encourage students to criticize their own work so that they may develop their own personal voice and critical thinking skills. Dr. Angela Oswald writes that this method of teaching "can help build the youth's capacity and confidence in their own ability to resolve similar situations in the future." In "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries," Peter Elbow, an English professor at the University of Massachusetts, argues that acknowledging too much criticism when writing may hurt the voice of the speaker. Elbow advises that writers must "take part in two contrary activities: paying lots of attention to [their own] voice and pushing away considerations of voice" (177). Blogs and social networking sites let the readers offer advice about anything in the work, replacing the unique voice of the speaker and the critical thinking process with an easy answer in someone else's post. As Haim Baruh states in his article "Are Computers Hurting Education?", "Independent thinking has been replaced by double clicking."

Lastly, I am concerned with Shetayh's solution. In her article, she argues that because blogging is practiced and enjoyed outside the classroom, it will be enjoyed inside the classroom as well. Anyone who has experienced a student's perspective of a classroom knows this claim is doubtful, at best. The primary difference between recreational activity (of any kind, including blogging) and activity for the classroom is the looming intimidation of a grade and deadline. Shetayh herself argues this position when she writes, "[M]y purpose was to convey that real writing exists *beyond the classroom* where students are motivated to write" (90). I agree with Shetayh on this point. Motivation exists beyond the classroom because there isn't a grade or deadline hanging over the writer's head. I disagree with Shetayh that this same motivation would exist for students assigned to write graded blogs in a classroom.

There is no doubt in my mind that an increasingly technological world needs an adaptable educational system, yet with the uncertain consequences that blogs and social networking sites have on our youth's development, it may not be wise to dive so readily into the unknown. The Internet has achieved widespread commercial appeal only in the last two decades; blogs and social media sites have been popular for less than one. Mass connectivity has already changed our ways of life, but must it also change the foundation of our youth's development? The consequences resulting from how people are educated span lifetimes and are irreversible. It is my hope that bringing forth the negative consequences of blogging paired with Shetayh's positive ideals will help education move tactically forward into the digital age.

Note

¹ According to Wikipedia, a troll is someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, such as an online discussion forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intent of provoking other users into a desired emotional response.

Works Cited

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