

Taking Up Thoreau's Pencil: A Luddite Explores Uses of Technology in
the American Literature Classroom

Caroline Chamberlin Hellman, New York City College of Technology,
CUNY

Just as there has been a slow food renaissance, I believe in advocating for a slow writing movement, composed of pen, paper and ideas. How would the Transcendentalists have treated Twitter? Emerson would likely have been an advocate of the circulations and communities of ideas, but individual, independent thought is compromised with the constant bombardment of communication. If Thoreau decried the uselessness of the post office in *Walden* because the institution brought him unworthy news, it is not difficult to extrapolate how he would feel about technology's encroachment on quotidian existence--people's perpetual status updates in his email inbox. In this misanthropic vein, one of my recent writing assignments asked a class to chronicle the experience of silencing their cell phones for twenty-four hours or longer. Having read *Walden*, many students were inspired to live deliberately, however temporarily. Some students wrote about their unhealthy dependence on technology and the recovery of time in days devoid of obsessive Blackberry refreshment.

This reliance on smart phones correlates with the increasing presence of shorthand, casual text message vernacular in students' written work. While some of my colleagues herald student writing in all forms, even crafting shorter writing assignments to appeal to net-speak sensibility, I believe that encouraging students to compose an eBay auction description or YouTube commentary on feline escapade seems to underscore the disposability of language and negate the potential power of writing outside the marketplace, in the name of human rights or artistic pursuit. I've found that my students are already fluent in these

compositional forms and that concision is one of many issues that must be critically examined in incorporating the argot of the internet in the classroom. In "Teaching to the Text Message" (*New York Times* 3/19/11), Andy Selsberg, an English professor at John Jay College, extols the merits of brief exposition. The author's rationale behind asking for shorter writing assignments seems to be that because students will routinely encounter this form in the world-at-large, so too should they encounter it in the college classroom. I do not believe that the classroom needs to mimic the online environment; instead, class can introduce material toward which students may not gravitate in idle iPhone time. Examining the calls for revolution on Twitter or Facebook in the recent political uprisings in the Middle East, for example, could generate provocative exercises in the study of concision and the power of language. Moreover, if a semester's writing class encourages students to write only a few sentences--sound bytes of content, whether expository or otherwise--there is little likelihood of sustained argument, evidence to support argumentation, or acknowledgement of other sources consulted. While we routinely observe politicians making up claims without substantiating them, I do not encourage my students to engage in the syllogistic "I write, therefore it is" Cartesian perversion.

The ability to write succinctly is meritorious, but I find that students often require more guidance in expanding upon original ideas than curtailing them. Not only are my students accustomed to writing in Twitter format, but they are more conversant in the art form than I will ever be. This was underscored for me recently in my email correspondence with a student who labored (successfully) over the course of the semester to improve his five-paragraph essays in an American literature survey class. It was not until he had painstakingly passed the midterm exam and turned in his first paper for the course that he felt comfortable revealing a bit of his life to me, his intelligence and idiosyncrasy illuminated through

brilliantly coded, acronym-laden emails. In his text-speak missives, laced with dry humor, he proffered a challenge to communicate with him in a language he had mastered long ago, a language that my colleagues and I puzzled over and deciphered only belatedly (*smh*). Not wanting to lose his wary investment in American literature and in persuasive academic writing, I encouraged him in his final paper to consider contemporary text-message speak alongside texts in which the use of dialect is central (Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*; Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*). The student responded with a thoughtful contemplation of linguistic communities and distinctions.

In addition, because the college where I teach is a technical institution with students pursuing degrees in areas such as entertainment technology or advertising and design, I ask students to examine texts that are experimental and multi-media in form, such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, in order to investigate interdisciplinary issues of storytelling and auto-ethnography. Students then have the option of writing about the text in a traditional literary analysis, or composing a hypertext narrative of their own that mirrors the fragmented, multi-media construction of *Dictee*. The latter endeavor results in particularly rewarding ekphrasis that combines the description of a paper text that was especially avant-garde with a self-portrait in emerging technology, akin to the contemporary rendering of painting of a sculpture rhetorical device.

Some readers will no doubt ascribe a cultural hierarchy to my teaching, but I believe that alongside awareness of web culture, students also benefit from reading, writing about, and composing works that are determinedly independent of the internet's textual forms. I recently dedicated ample time to explaining the worth of reading a slave narrative to a student who announced that Harriet Jacobs' harrowing autobiographical account of her escape from slavery did nothing to buttress his historical knowledge. In responding without emotional

investment to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, this student stated, essentially, that he was already in possession of the generalized digest form of the atrocity, which suited his needs more than any specific primary source. While the democracy of the web enables more people to engage in writing on some level and to exchange ideas, it also permits a false sense of authority, credibility, and knowledge. The advent of Twitter and other concise forms has led to attention deficit, news-in-hyper-brief, and a lack of critical discernment of sources.

My teaching strategy is to incorporate technology's extraordinary information access if not necessarily its lexicons. I had a particularly worthwhile class discussion of Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* because of the introduction of extratextual information that is available on the internet. In preparing for class, I encountered the Department of Homeland Security's official report on the investigation into the death of Danticat's Uncle, Joseph Dantica, who along with Danticat's father forms the subject of her dual memoir. The document includes interviews with all of the detention center and medical personnel involved in the case, Dantica's lawyer's testimony regarding the inhumane treatment of his client, the coroner's report on the body, and Florida congressman Kendrick Meeks' letter of advocacy for the victim. In class, I made the point that Danticat's memoir is a counterhistory to the official government inquiry and that one useful facet of the proliferation of information on the internet is access to these competing narratives so that the reader may draw his or her own conclusions. Each document in the report contributes substantively to the understanding of Danticat's text. In a class on civil rights in American literature, I asked students to read *Poems from Guantánamo*, edited by Marc Falkoff, alongside the Hamdan v. Rumsfeld court case. Students become aware that they can locate such documents on the internet amidst other important and potentially controversial government reports. The incorporation of hypo- or extra-textual that

augments the class texts underscores for students that the study of American literature is necessarily complex, involving numerous narratives, and that it cannot subsist in a vacuum but is very much a part of national, public consciousness.

Much recent scholarship concerns the age-old debate regarding how best to teach writing and literature as well as the contemporary, evolving dialog between technology, popular culture, and more traditional methodologies in the college classroom. The spectrum of approaches to teaching with the use of technology is as varied as the spectrum of approaches to teaching American literature. As the canon is ever-expansive, so too is technology in form and application. Although I admit to a pre-Raphaelite resistance, advocating a return to craft sans technology, my American literature class discussions have been greatly enriched by information technology. I hope that by reading and responding to diverse historical and contemporary writings, in addition to composing expository pieces of various length and purpose, my students (and I) will not only contextualize current pedagogical trends but also contribute actively and thoughtfully to this emergent archive.

Works Cited

Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Dictee*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Brother, I'm Dying*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008. Print.

Falkoff, Marc, ed. *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007. Print.

Joseph Nozius Dantica Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General Reports of Investigation. 21 November 2010. <http://www.dhs.gov/xoig/assets/OIG_foia_dantica.pdf>

Selsberg, Andy. "Teaching to the Text Message." *The New York Times*. 19 March 2011. Web.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Random House, 2000. Print.

Twain, Mark. *Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2008.

Whitehead, Colson. *Sag Harbor*. New York: Anchor Books, 2009. Print.

CAROLINE HELLMAN is an Assistant Professor of English at New York City College of Technology, CUNY, where she teaches writing and literature. Her book, *Domesticity and Design in American Women's Lives and Literature: Stowe, Alcott, Cather, and Wharton Writing Home*, was published by Routledge in 2011. Dr. Hellman was the recipient of a 2010-2011 Fulbright Award in American Literature at the University of Antwerp, Belgium.