The Medium, the Message, and Digital Pedagogy in an Early American Literature Course
Scott Ellis, Southern Connecticut State University

One of the standard tensions that college faculty have tried to reconcile is the difference between our work as scholars and our work as teachers. Many, if not most, of us understand that this dichotomy is usually exaggerated, but we also recognize that the work we do when writing and reading scholarship does not always necessarily translate into the courses we teach. While we may design our courses with current scholarship in mind, and while we may engage in the intellectual conversations that energize our fields, we also know that our teaching must be guided by student needs and curricular goals, which may not intersect with our scholarly work. Argue as we might about the false division of scholarship and teaching, most of us recognize that erasing this dichotomy is often very difficult.

Given this challenge, I would like to document one possible approach to bridging scholarship and teaching, and to do so, I will explain how I used free digital resources to incorporate prominent scholarly conversations into a course in early American literature. I therefore hope to demonstrate ways in which electronic resources can strengthen our teaching by allowing us to offer our students new insight into texts, periods, and the literary/historical narratives that shape our knowledge. Specifically, I seek to show how faculty can effectively use both blogs and wikis in the classroom to teach literature courses—in this case, early American literature—in creative and engaging ways. Both blogs and wikis have emerged over the past few years as exemplars of a contemporary digital culture, the former through its emphasis on asynchronic—and often anonymous—discussion and the latter through its reliance on non-hierarchical collaboration. Neither were created primarily for pedagogical
purposes, but if used effectively in the classroom, both can become powerful tools to help our students better comprehend our course material by allowing them to perform—not just read about—some of the various historical and cultural practices we explore in our classes.

Before I detail these assignments and approaches, I should note that I did not explain the correlation between classroom activities and the ideas or content under investigation to my students until after we concluded each section. While the course depended upon self reflection, I wanted the students to experience each assignment before this reflection occurred. For instance, when students registered for the course blog, I directed them to create pseudonyms without explaining why. Similarly, when students shifted from collaboration to competition in their final wiki project, I did not explain the direct correlation between their work and the scholarly concepts of the coffee house and bookshop until after the project was complete. Although I introduced and explained the critical, scholarly concepts of oratory versus print culture and coffee house versus bookshop throughout the semester, I found that students gained the most when I withheld explanation about the correlation between these concepts and their classroom practice until after they completed their work. By doing so, students approached each assignment and project without preconceptions and did not try to steer their work to artificially correspond with the pedagogical objectives of our course.

**Blogging Performance and Print Culture**

One of the key discussions in early American literary studies over the past two decades has involved the debate between print culture and oratory. Proponents of print culture, particularly Michael Warner, suggest that the Republican era was dominated by an attention to print, particularly anonymous print. The *Federalist Papers*, the "Declaration Of Independence," and *Common Sense* all exemplify the function of
Enlightenment reason in key documents and debates in the early American republic, particularly when they could not be ascribed to a particular person. As Warner argues in *The Letters of the Republic*, the "principle of negativity" highlights the virtue of anonymity as writers unencumbered by their public identity attempt to speak universally (42).

Warner's thesis, as influential as it has been in early American studies, has also been challenged by scholars such as Sandra Gustafson, Christopher Looby, and Jay Fliegelman, who argue instead that performance, oratory, and even personality were crucial features during this formative era of the early republic. Speeches, sermons, and representations of voices in literary texts suggest for these scholars that early American culture cannot be reduced to the printed word. These scholars therefore offer a counternarrative to Warner's ideas about anonymity and the centrality of print, and their ideas have likewise influenced our understanding of both print and oral culture before, during, and even after the American Revolution.

Although engaging to scholars in early American literary studies, this debate regarding the influence of print and oral culture is often left out of the early American literary classroom, or when it is included, teachers may emphasize only one side or the other. Instead we might give students a sense of the intellectual discussions in which we scholars engage. To do so, I have found it best to incorporate the print versus oral debate into the very structure of my class. In this way, students not only learn about recent scholarship, but they also get to experience the ramifications of such debates, particularly as these ideas played out for people in the revolutionary era.

I therefore used my classroom as both the location for and focus of our study. To explore the performance and oratory side of the debate, we held classroom discussions in the traditional manner. I would pose questions and allow students to respond, a standard practice that
nonetheless exemplified in a subtle way the performative aspect of persuasion. Crucial to this theory is one's voice, the power of persuasion, and the core function of the orator, an "embodied" speaker who is known, seen, and heard. In such conversations, the personality and performance of the student speaker is crucial to the communicative process. Students quickly learn whose voices they respect or reject, whose ideas make sense or not, and whose opinions they might find compelling or flawed. The ideas are never fully divorced from the student who presents them, a situation that students will reflect upon later in the course when evaluating the importance of embodied performance in persuasion.

The standard approach to leading embodied, performative classroom discussions, however, does not allow us to examine the "print culture" side of the debate, with its emphasis on abstract reason fostered through anonymity. For this scholarly narrative, I therefore turned to blogs. A blog, or "Web log," is an online forum that allows for easy asynchronous communication, and unlike many of the course management systems that our universities and colleges use, most blogs are free, publicly accessible, and easy to use. In many ways, a blog functions like the traditional discussion board, on which a faculty member can post a question and students can respond. As Edward Gallagher writes, "the art of writing on the discussion board is to keep the conversation going," and he uses the metaphor of the non-competitive racquetball game or tennis match to illustrate how this works (115). Unlike the traditional classroom bulletin board, though, the benefit of the blog is the ability for students to create pseudonyms under which their ideas appear.

We use blogs in many of my classes, and for this course, I created a free course blog site using [http://wordpress.com/](http://wordpress.com/). (Our course blog was [http://earlyamericawrites.wordpress.com/](http://earlyamericawrites.wordpress.com/).) As creator of this blog, I was able to "invite" members to participate in the blog, and once I added the email addresses of my students, they received the invitation, which
provided a link that allowed them to create an account. As they did so, however, I asked them to create a pseudonym for their user name that did not refer to them in any way (no reference to gender, appearance, distinctive hobbies, etc.); whenever they posted to the blog site, this pseudonym—and not their real name—would appear on the site. Thus, among the participants of our blog were “accentfiend,” “ihaveablog,” “vutters,” and “Lazybum14,” among others. Since they received credit for posting to the blog site (a minimum of eight posts over the course of the semester), I needed to attach these pseudonyms to my students, so they also had to email me privately and let me know what pseudonym they chose.

I then ran the blog much like I would run a normal discussion board. I would pose questions about a text or texts for an upcoming class, and students would post a response (300-word minimum) before 7:00 p.m. the night before class, a response that referred both to the primary text as well as to at least one other student post. I would then often begin class by projecting the blog responses on a screen to initiate discussion or summarize the central threads that emerged. I usually have had good results from such asynchronous discussions, and the blogs were no exception. Students engaged with the material and questions well, which prepared them for our class discussion. I also frequently asked students to synthesize or compare works (juxtapose the ideas presented about gender from Judith Sargent Murray with those of Anne Bradstreet or Mary

---

1 As one might expect, this time restriction—posting before 7:00 p.m the night before class to earn credit—was not popular with students, but as I explained several times throughout the semester, they needed to engage with the question and other students’ posts well before class in order to fully comprehend the material. Hastily reading and writing about a text just before class does not allow for such engagement. To give students plenty of time to consider the questions, I posted them at least five days (and usually a week) prior to the date on which the post was due. Moreover, this time requirement also allowed me to read the posts the night before class and consider ways to address any questions that emerge in the posts or to reconsider the points I had planned to discuss in class, especially if a fruitful and engaged virtual discussion, one I had not expected to discuss in class, emerged on the blog responses.
Rowlandson, for instance) which allowed them to consider the similarities and differences among different writers.

Whereas classroom discussion mirrored the traits of performance and oratory, blogs enabled students to experience a print/digital culture that focused on the ideas of the post and not the student who wrote them. As my students soon learned, their responses in the classroom—when each person came to learn about, like, or even dislike other students—are much different from their responses to a student who remains unknown to everyone else in class. For instance during our section on Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, I posted a question asking students to explore the ramifications of Paine's own use of anonymity in the reception of his pamphlet. When one of my students, who called him/herself "thinkspring521," argued that anonymity possibly allowed Paine to garner a larger reception for his work, another student, who called him/herself "scsustudent," disagreed and wrote "thinkspring521 mentions at the end of his/her post that some of Paine's views were strong and could be construed as inappropriate . . . . this is an interesting point, but I don't completely agree with it. I think that Paine's anonymity helped him, not because it would bring more attention to his work, but for protection."

Scsustudent's response to thinkspring591 demonstrates a fundamental element of the print culture theory in early American studies. Rather than focusing on the personality of thinkspring591, scsustudent instead is forced to refer to the writer as "him/her" and proceeds to participate in an engaged and rational debate about the ideas in the first post without consideration of who wrote it. By pairing classroom discussion with blogs, the classroom toggled between embodied performance and pseudonymous print, a strategy that not only allowed students to understand contemporary literary debates, but also allowed them to experience the impact of these two theories as it might have occurred to residents in the early American colonies and early years of the Republic.
Manuscript Culture, the Literary Marketplace, and Wikis

The second element of the course in which I used technology did not explore a theoretical debate as much as it used an online tool to demonstrate a literary and social transition in early America, one from a collaborative, manuscript culture to a competitive, marketplace book culture. To demonstrate this transition, I relied upon a course wiki. Like the course blog, our wiki was free, public, and unconnected to the University, and for this wiki, I used www.wetpaint.com. Like blogs, wikis—essentially websites that make it easy to create, update, and collaborate—gave my students a greater voice in the class and allowed them to experience early American literary culture first-hand. While I used our course wiki to post my syllabus, assignments, and course policies, I also used it as the location for students’ final research projects, for which they were to explore in detail one of the texts we studied in class. Combining group and individual work, this project directed students to collaborate, but it also allowed them to experience the tension of a competitive literary marketplace. (See “Wikis in Higher Education” for a general introduction to wikis.)

As early American scholars have shown, the production and circulation of writing in the British colonies paralleled a similar process in England and the Continent, but often in ways that are dissimilar to a later market-driven culture. For instance, in his influential book Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America, David Shields has argued that sociability, politeness, and manuscript culture significantly shaped public discourse in the colonies. Unlike nineteenth-century models of literary competition, many colonial writers in the eighteenth century circulated manuscripts, wrote for friends, and participated in a coffee-house, tea-table culture that fostered both civility and public, intellectual critique. For Shields, this
shared civic engagement gave a social voice to large, oft-silenced segments of the population, thereby creating a more democratic discourse.

Such an analysis of civic discourse corresponds well with collaborative work, so to foster students’ engagement and understanding with such an engaged and democratic culture, students worked in groups, seven total, on similar texts and created group wiki pages to reflect their efforts. Each group member read and wrote a critical analysis about a scholarly article that examined the group's chosen text, and after they posted this analysis to their wiki page, I asked the other group members to peer review it. Using the "history" link on the wiki page, I could track each student's work with peer review, and I let them know that their grade for this portion of the project involved not only their analysis but also their participation in peer review. To encourage collaboration and this "coffee house culture" even further, members worked together to create group pages for their projects, and, as I note below, they presented these pages to the rest of the class during a group presentation, in which every group member had to participate. For each step in this portion of the assignment, group members collaborated, both outside of class in person and inside the virtual world of the wiki. My goal with this portion of the assignment was for students to develop their own virtual "coffee house," in which they would share their work and engage in civil discourse, thereby allowing each member of the group a voice in the groups' conversations.

In scholarly discussions of the early American literary culture, however, this collaborative, civic environment for sharing one's work and ideas with friends and acquaintances shifts around the beginning of the 19th century to a more competitive literary marketplace, one in which broad, unknowable audiences, booksellers, and eventually book publishers begin to play a central role. As scholars such as Warner, John Tebbel, William Charvat, and others have shown, the rising number of
writers in the United States corresponds with an increase in literary competition with other writers, especially British writers, whose work, unconstrained by international copyright, was pirated and sold cheaply in the United States. With only a burgeoning marketplace for books, which were relatively expensive to the common reader, literary writers were forced to compete to sell their work.

The second part of our course wiki assignment therefore drew upon this competitive theoretical framework by directing students to turn their collaborative group work into a "digital book" that they would try to sell in the marketplace of our class. Their collaborative wiki pages and group presentation to the rest of the class thereby shifted in metaphor from collaboration in a coffee house to competition in a bookstore. As students prepared for the shift, I asked them to consider one crucial question: if a reader entered a bookstore, how would you ensure that she would spend her money on your book and not the other books in the store? To shift this question from a theoretical to a practical one, I distributed to each class member a "bank note" worth $50. Each student had to assign a monetary value to the wiki projects of the other six groups, with the total for all projects equaling $50. I informed the students that I would tally the banknotes and announce the winning group project—the one with the highest average dollar value—on the final day of class.

During the final week of the course, students went online and examined the other groups' wiki pages, taking notes about the substance, rigor, and quality of their classmates' work. Moreover, the students attended and took notes about the group presentations, watching to see if the presentations served as an enticement to change the monetary value they assigned to each group's project's. As one might expect, this shift from collaboration to competition initiated in all students a different set of priorities. Students returned to the group pages that they had already created and revised them to make them more appealing to potential
customers, often by adding more enticing images and graphics to their pages. Likewise, the group presentation that they had prepared but not yet given shifted in emphasis from basic communication about their projects to, in a sense, an advertisement for their pages in which they showcased the value of their group’s work. While some of the group’s pages and presentations better reflected the competitive book culture of the twenty-first century than the early nineteenth century—which was also a valuable learning experience—the students noted on the final day of class and in their evaluations of the course that this shift from virtual coffee house to bookstore allowed them to experience and more clearly understand the different cultural contexts of early American writing.

Anonymity, democratic discourse, and collaboration—all key components of these two digital tools—have appeared in various ways throughout literary history. Even in a literary era as remote from contemporary digital culture as early America, one can find connections that will help students engage with course material and ideas. Through the use of blogs, for instance, we can help our students draw the connection between the function of anonymity in their online class posts to the function of anonymity in eighteenth-century newspaper and pamphlet political debates. Moreover, this shift from online, out-of-class, and anonymous electronic discussion juxtaposes itself with the in-class, embodied performances of student discussion, thereby giving the instructor classroom practices to help teach two of the central scholarly narratives in the field of early American studies: the predominance and influence of print culture and that of performance and oratory. Similarly, wikis allow for a two-fold exploration of early American literary culture. On the one hand, the collaboration that inherently constitutes the wiki form allows students, through group projects, to experience the early American interactive dynamics of salons, coffee houses, and civic discussion in the formation of ideas. On the other hand, the group wiki projects can serve
as models of a burgeoning literary marketplace developing at the end of the eighteenth century, particularly when we ask the students to place a monetary value on each group's finished product.

Having taught this course in different iterations several times, I have found that students learn more when they experience and participate in the concepts I introduce rather than merely take notes about them. The feedback I have received from students in evaluations and conversations reflect this as well. While the correlation between scholarly idea and classroom practice may be imperfect, and while my explanations of scholarly conversations and debates may not reflect their every nuance, the students leave this course with a solid understanding of some of the core ideas in the field early American literary studies as well as a comprehension and experience of what it meant to be a writer and reader in the British colonies and in the early years of the United States. Using assignments and projects from several recent classes, I suggest that, as Marshall McLuhan might put it, the digital medium can also serve as the pedagogical message in the literature classroom.

Although the specific examples I describe pertained to a course in early American literature and culture, I believe these approaches to using blogs, wikis, and even other digital resources could be modified and applied to a variety of courses. In examining the effects of book reviewing on the literature of nearly every era over the past 300 years, for example, one could use blogs to explore and demonstrate the benefits and drawbacks of anonymous reviewing in the process of shaping public literary discussions. Are anonymous or pseudonymous reviews truly objective and universal as such reviewers suggested, or do they merely mask a reviewer's personal agenda? Similarly, when students use pseudonyms in their blogs, are their comments and critiques more restrained and rational, or does this freedom from classroom consequences lead instead to unrestrained vitriol?
Through their emphasis on collaboration, wikis certainly allow for strong group projects in any course, but literature courses in particular could use the layout of wikis—a central/title page, table of contents, chapters and subchapters—to mirror book production and reception. I could envision wikis that devote separate pages and sub-pages to different elements of a literary text, from character and plot to point of view and dialogue. Such a layout would allow for thoughtful collaboration, as students in groups work together to help everyone understand particular literary texts, or to foster friendly competition, where groups compete against each other to develop the most helpful resources for a given text or literary period.

These are just a few sample ideas, and enterprising teachers would certainly be able to develop alternative examples as well. As I am sure we all understand, we do not use such resources simply because they are available, but because they offer our students a new, vibrant way to engage with our course material. Moreover, we can use and highlight the features of such resources to experience the very ideas that shape our course content. Once we bridge this gap between learning about an idea and experiencing it, we can begin to develop new ways to bridge the gap between our scholarship and our teaching.
Works Cited


"Wikis in Higher Education."