

Responsible Use of Technology in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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Social constructionist theory supports the student-centered classroom, and believes that knowledge, writing, and thinking are socially constructed. Implementing technology in a social constructionist classroom will allow students to enter into new discourse communities. Technology should not be used in the composition classroom simply because it is available; instructors need to understand what technology brings to the classroom and should use it to enhance the teaching of writing and to help students meet course goals. By exploring the use of two popular technologies within a social constructionist first-year composition classroom, I will argue that only through a theoretical understanding of the teaching and learning of these technologies can an instructor use them responsibly to create a balance between traditional and technological coursework in first-year composition. To illustrate my argument, I will use as examples Microsoft *PowerPoint 2007* and *Blackboard*, a brand of course management software (CMS) that allows instructors to create online learning communities in a traditional classroom setting. By fully understanding these technologies and the theoretical implications of their use, educators will be better prepared to help students use them

responsibly. Social constructionist pedagogy requires an instructor to consider the diverse needs of the students and to anticipate their questions, fears, and their possible resistance. It will encourage the instructor to teach not only how to use the technology, but why and how to use it to enhance learning. Both technologies are readily available and competent tools that will help create a responsible balance between traditional and technological coursework in the first-year composition classroom. It is time to take responsibility for the teaching of these technologies, and time to stop assuming that *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* are thoughtfully instructed in other classrooms.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In language arts and English studies classrooms and in first-year and advanced English composition courses, teachers need to recognize that they can no longer simply educate students to become technology consumers without also helping them learn how to think critically about technology and the social issues surrounding its use.

--Cynthia L. Selfe

It began to dawn on us, in short, as we read and talked about what we read, that our students, however poorly prepared academically, did not come to us as blank slates. They arrived in our classes already deeply acculturated, already full-fledged, competent members (as we were, too) of some community or another.

--Kenneth Bruffee

Until recently, first year college composition has focused almost exclusively on form, content, and rhetorical strategies within the boundaries of written texts. As I begin to teach first-year composition at the college level, my goal is to educate students across the curriculum not only through the use of written texts, but also with a broad range of emerging technologies. As a social constructionist, I am a supporter of the student-centered classroom, and I believe that knowledge, writing, and thinking are socially constructed. Implementing technology in a social constructionist classroom will allow my students to enter into new discourse communities that will prepare them for courses outside first year composition and the world outside the university. By exploring the use of two popular technologies within a social constructionist first-year composition classroom, I will argue that only through a theoretical understanding of the teaching and learning of these technologies can an instructor use them responsibly to create a balance

between traditional and technological coursework in first-year composition.

Technology should not be used in the composition classroom simply because it is available; instructors need to understand what technology brings to the classroom and should use it to enhance the teaching of writing and to help students meet course goals. In her article “Pedagogy in the Computer-networked Classroom,” Janet M. Eldred stresses the importance of integrating networking technology into composition pedagogy because it presents writing as a social and collaborative process. She posits that “[t]echnology is not neutral: as soon as we implement it, we slant it in a certain direction. To hope for it just to ‘fall into place’ is to play Russian roulette with the effectiveness of our classrooms. Management is thus a crucial issue” (240). Slanting technology is viewed as an instructor teaching the technology the way he or she understands it, which is not always the best way. An informed and conscientious educator will learn what technology is available, how it can meet course goals, what its limitations are, and in what ways it can help students learn. In short, to ensure the effectiveness of a technology-enhanced classroom, one must use that technology responsibly. To illustrate my argument, I will use as examples Microsoft *PowerPoint* 2007 and *Blackboard*, a brand of course management software (CMS) that allows instructors to create online learning communities in a traditional classroom setting. By fully understanding these technologies and the theoretical implications of their use, educators will be better prepared to help students use them responsibly as well.

Giving composition students the time and tools to write with these technologies will help them understand and retain the knowledge they gain in first-year composition. Many instructors know, or have experienced in their own education, that the transmission style of teaching is not effective. It is true that an instructor could simply assign reading from the manual to Microsoft *PowerPoint* 2007 or the online help section of *Blackboard* and expect her students to maneuver themselves within these technologies; the result, however, would be a classroom of students focused on how the technology works instead of how it benefits their learning. Students can learn quickly what button to push to add a modern graphic to their *PowerPoint* presentation, but if they don't understand why or when those graphics are important, the theory will be lost in the technology. Instead of having students page through a manual to learn how to post a discussion thread, an instructor should explain what a thread is, what it accomplishes in a classroom, what it adds to the discussion, and *then* the specifics of adding a thread. Social constructionist pedagogy requires an instructor to consider the diverse needs of the students and to anticipate their questions, fears, and their possible resistance. It will encourage the instructor to teach not only how to use the technology, but why and how to use it to enhance learning. I see this as responsible use of technology in the classroom.

“Responsible use” is important to define. There are three main components of responsible use that are imperative for instructors to follow when implementing technology in their classrooms. First, the instructor must fully understand the functions,

capabilities, and limitations of the technology. Next, the instructor needs to teach those same functions, capabilities, and limitations to students so they understand them as well. Finally, after both instructors and students achieve a firm understanding of the functions, capabilities and limitations, the instructor can apply social constructionist theory and pedagogy to plan assignments (that use the technologies) to meet course goals. For an instructor to teach *PowerPoint* responsibly, she needs to know how to navigate *PowerPoint*, how it typically has been used, what potential it has to benefit her classroom, and how to model and teach it to her class. For example, an instructor who lectures with *PowerPoint* by reading directly off of slides without taking questions and expecting students to scribble down notes for regurgitation is not following what I deem the “responsible” way to teach. This teacher is using what Paulo Freire called the “banking concept” of education where students are merely receptacles to be filled with information and then emptied as needed (68). This “transmission” method is irresponsible because it does not encourage students to retain anything; they simply regurgitate information without questioning or even understanding it. Furthermore, successful learning does not come directly from the instructor but from a variety of collaborative activities in the classroom. Students learn from other students by hearing voices in the classroom, and those voices can also be heard through the use of *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard*. When both instructors and students view these technologies through a social constructionist lens as more than a tool for quick and easy presentations or a drop box for

assignments, real learning can occur.

The composition classroom is the best place to begin learning technologies such as Microsoft *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard*. At most universities and technical colleges, a first-year writing course like Composition, Introduction to College Writing, or Written Communications is required for each student. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) offers forty sections of Introduction to College Writing each fall semester at twenty seats per section. Of the 2000 new students every fall semester at UWEC, 800 of them are registered for first-year composition in their first semester. Most of these students are probably familiar with *PowerPoint*, and some might have used or heard of course management software (CMS) like *Blackboard*. Although students may be familiar with *PowerPoint*, they probably did not learn the theory behind this presentation software. They might have sat through many presentations and created some of their own, for informational purposes only. These students might not have been given the chance to view the production of *PowerPoint* as a learning tool, or, better yet, a writing tool. It was merely a tool to fill with text and then speak that text verbatim to a group of people. Familiarity with *Blackboard* or any other CMS before college is less likely, but even if students have used or heard of it, its use probably was never theorized for them. If the students used a CMS, it was probably to post a message or to turn in homework. When they start college, however, students are ready to begin a higher level of critical thinking, and what better time to teach them how to unlearn what they have learned about these technologies than in one of their first college courses? A “first” college course offers a number of challenges for new college students, and a new level of motivation is one of them.

Motivation in first-year composition is important because most students would not choose writing or English as their favorite subject. They do not like to write, perhaps because they have had a bad experience with writing in the past, possibly a failure or an embarrassment in a writing class, and wish to avoid writing completely. But these students cannot avoid taking first-year composition if they plan to graduate. How then can instructors turn this resistance to writing into motivation? My answer to that question lies with a theoretical use of technology. Many new high school graduates in first-year composition are more technologically inclined than we may think. Some have had access to computers since elementary school, and some walk through the doors of the university with a laptop, an iPod, and a cell phone with internet access—all technological tools they use daily for communication. Teaching these students to communicate effectively through *Blackboard* and to prepare carefully planned multimedia presentations with *PowerPoint* will excite them and motivate them to *learn* through technology rather than to simply use it. If educators capitalize on what students are interested in, which is always a key for a responsible student-centered educator, the students are more apt to cooperate and collaborate eagerly.

First-year composition is also the best place for a new approach to these technologies because composition focuses on theory-based pedagogies such as collaborative learning, peer-review, writing as process, and writing to learn, all important components of students' introduction to college writing. For example, one of the main features of *Blackboard* is the discussion board. Students write a response to a prompt or question and thus begin their first discussion thread. The writing of that first post garners replies, and those replies require students to think and respond thoughtfully. *Blackboard*

is often a less threatening venue than the classroom, allowing students' time to think and to respond at their own pace. Students are less likely to feel silenced in online discussion. There are no awkward silences or sideways glances to sort out within the discussion board. If carefully guided, students will begin to see and hear their own voices in the discussion and therefore will become more confident users of that medium through writing. By writing posts and reading others' posts, students become a part of this online classroom and therefore valued members of a new learning community.

The following review of literature surrounding *PowerPoint*, *Blackboard*, and social constructionist theory will compare the typical ways in which these tools are used with some intentional, theoretical ways they should be applied in the composition classroom. The following social constructionists set the stage for this discussion through their assertions that student-centered learning is the foundation of a successful classroom. Scholars writing about the use of technology in the classroom, however, disagree about the usefulness of these products and ultimately affirm my insistence on a theoretical, and thereby responsible, understanding of their use.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the newest edition of Victor Villanueva's *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, he has made room for the "technological explosion" that affects students and teachers of composition every day: "It doesn't appear as if technology has made its way into our theoretical discussions...not because of any shortcoming in our scholars but because of the speed with which the things written about become archaic" (xi). The speed of technology is quickly taking over, and it is overtaking some composition classrooms because teachers are implementing it often before they fully understand it. Chris Anson points out that educators cannot approach technology as "individual consumers"; instead they must approach as "collective producers" in order to be successful (798). Anson warns that educators must be aware of the "dazzle of innovation" so that it does not lead to irresponsible teaching or learning (816). Being pressured into using technology in the classroom should not happen, but using technology in an effective way while holding true to the essential methods of teaching writing is what should take place (799). Anson, like me, is not calling for a complete change in the teaching of writing, but for a balance of traditional methods with innovative technological opportunities. Although most faculty members realize that technology can enhance the research process or facilitate the submission of papers, they might not consider how technology can enhance the teaching and learning process itself (798). I call for educators to view technology as an important learning tool, and to give it a place in their pedagogy that allows students to use it to build upon their previous knowledge, instead of using technology merely to simplify classroom practice. Technology is another way to teach students to construct knowledge themselves, rather than to wait for the teacher to construct it for them. Technology will

allow for that teacher/student line to be blurred because as much as the teacher can teach her students about technology in the composition classroom, so can her students teach her about what they already bring to this technology community.

When we add computers or any kind of technology to the social constructionist classroom, the focus may shift and the theory may get lost in the technology. Richard A. Lanham, in the foreword to Carolyn Handa's book *Computers and Community*, calls for the use of technology to be informed by theory. He says "The most profound changes wrought by computers in the composition classroom are social, political, and pedagogical, not technological. Digital technology enfranchises this revolutionary pedagogy, but does not mandate it" (xiii). In other words, the use of technology will benefit and change the composition classroom (because the addition of anything inevitably leads to change), but technology should not obscure the theory or pedagogy that was in place before it was implemented. Because students are sitting at computers does not mean they cannot collaborate, discuss, or learn; they simply have a new way of achieving those goals, and they need to understand why they are using that technology and how its use will benefit them. Here enters the new community of technological learning. Cynthia L. Selfe, in her book *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*, calls for composition courses "to recognize that they can no longer simply educate students to become technology consumers without also helping them learn how to think critically about technology and the social issues surrounding its use" (152). Like Lanham, Selfe also believes there is more to computers than the technology they bring along with them. Selfe defends her use of theory with computers in an essay from Handa's compilation, "Technology in the English Classroom:

Computers through the Lens of Feminist Theory,” when she calls for an examination of the impact computer technology has on language and society. With computer use still in its infancy, Selfe explains, strides have not been made to connect computer use with a theoretical perspective. Selfe warns that “[u]ntil we share some theoretical vision of this topic, we will never glimpse the larger social or educational picture that could give our everyday classroom efforts direction and meaning” (119). Although Selfe is speaking strictly of feminist theory in this essay, many principles of feminist theory inform composition theory and social constructionist theory, such as the importance of voice, active learning, eliminating one-way power relationships, and the value of collaboration. Selfe believes that computers in the composition classroom will provide wider egalitarian access to the student community (120).

Teaching college writing in the twenty-first century relies increasingly on computers. At the very least, computers are used to research and write papers. Without sufficient focus on and guidance of theory when teaching with computers in the writing classroom of today, students may miss their opportunity to really understand how to learn with new technology and why technology impacts them the way it does.

### *PowerPoint*

*PowerPoint* is a popular technology often used in classrooms. The definition of *PowerPoint* from the Microsoft Office *PowerPoint* website reads:

Microsoft Office *PowerPoint* 2007 enables users to quickly create high-impact, dynamic presentations, while integrating workflow and ways to easily share information. From the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface

to the new graphics and formatting capabilities, Office *PowerPoint* 2007 puts the control in your hands to create great-looking presentations” (1).

This software, though used heavily, is not always used responsibly in the classroom. Linda Mahin, in her article “*PowerPoint* Pedagogy” states that, according to Microsoft, thirty million *PowerPoint* presentations are given everyday, and *PowerPoint* can be found on 250 million computers worldwide (219). It is safe to say that most students have probably had experience with *PowerPoint*, but some of those experiences have been more helpful than others. For example, a faculty member who uses *PowerPoint* responsibly will create a presentation that allows students time to write, listen, and think. Rather than expecting them to furiously copy long definitions off of slides, the teacher might create short bullet points that students can quickly digest and then listen to or participate in a discussion of each point. Instead of encouraging Freire’s “banking model of education”—where the teacher “deposits” knowledge for students to simply “save”—*PowerPoint* can and should allow students to participate actively, not passively, in their own learning. This kind of learning demonstrates social constructionist pedagogy, and further examination of *PowerPoint*’s use from social constructionist perspectives could help lead composition faculty to recognize its value.

Microsoft *PowerPoint* presentations should not be mind-numbing, dull, and sleep inducing, but they should also not be referred to as “the devil,” as Julia Keller suggests. *PowerPoint*, unfortunately, has acquired a bad reputation, but I believe this misconception can be repaired. A review of the literature will show that scholars who “demonize” *PowerPoint* stop short of a theoretical examination of it; where they stop is where my argument for responsible use and teaching of *PowerPoint* begins. I will begin

this conversation with the detractors and move towards users who support *PowerPoint* in business and in their classrooms.

Edward Tufte, theorist of information presentation and author of several visual design publications, published *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* in 2003. In this book Tufte denounces *PowerPoint* and considers most presentations as “*PowerPoint Phluff*,” which he defines as a “preoccupation with format, not content, an attitude...that turns everything into a sales pitch” (4). Tufte believes that the style of *PowerPoint* is “pushy...[and] imposes itself on the audience” (13). Ian Parker in his 2001 *New Yorker* piece “*Absolute PowerPoint: Can a software package edit our thoughts?*” posits that *PowerPoint* has a “private interior influence. It edits ideas” (76). One problem Parker brings to light, as do Tufte and many other critics, is the AutoContent Wizard which supplies the user with templates of various presentations. Parker claims that these templates are so close to finished products that presenters’ original thoughts are edited into these templates and used in many of the thirty million presentations given every day. Parker rightly states that speakers “should be making other, more important decisions” rather than graphics and design in their presentations, but he never pushes that idea further in his article (76). Clive Thompson claims in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* that “*PowerPoint* makes you dumb” because he also believes that *PowerPoint* is only good at manipulating facts, instead of presenting facts clearly (88). Thompson quotes *PowerPoint* product manager Simon Marks who says that people like Tufte are fans of information density, and that it is simply a matter of choice whether the presenter creates a dense presentation or not (88). None of these authors approaches the concept of learning from *PowerPoint* presentations; they focus instead on the diverse methods of

presenting facts. Informing the use of *PowerPoint* with social constructionist theory will allow these authors to view *PowerPoint* as a useful tool for presenting and learning.

The detractors of *PowerPoint* do not address what the presenter can do when she finds herself boring her audience, lecturing, or reading directly off of her slides. They do not give the presenter any other options, but instead complain about the abuse of *PowerPoint* and how it should be left behind. In reality, *PowerPoint* will never be left behind. As many of the articles stated, there are thirty million *PowerPoint* presentations given every single day. The question is: What can educators<sup>1</sup> achieve with *PowerPoint* as a staple in our Microsoft Office package and a daily occurrence in meetings and in classrooms? In other words, how can educators make the best of *PowerPoint*? Educators can reduce the limitations of *PowerPoint* by teaching it and modeling it using social constructionist theory as a guide. Each skeptic I read did not think theoretically about *PowerPoint* before deeming it nearly useless. In the postscript of Tufte's book, a reader wrote to him and asked, "I've seen some very good presentations using *PowerPoint*. What about that?" Tufte's answer is that a good speaker with good content can make a *PowerPoint* presentation successful, but he also claims that presenters should not have to "work around the PP cognitive style" because presenting itself is hard work and "we shouldn't have to fight all the time with *PowerPoint*" (27). *PowerPoint's* cognitive style, as Tufte believes, is that the program thinks for the user. The Auto Content Wizard is one example that Tufte employs as it houses many templates to help presenters begin writing a presentation. Tufte asserts that *PowerPoint* makes it difficult for the presenter to think on her own, and therefore compels the presenter to use the templates provided.

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<sup>1</sup> I also believe that business people could benefit from this theory, but since my focus is pedagogy, I will address educators only.

I assert that if Tufte and his fellow detractors understood some of the principles of social constructionist theory to the preparation of a *PowerPoint* presentation, they might not judge it so harshly. Garr Reynolds, who wrote *Presentation Zen*, is one of the few who believes that the academic value of *PowerPoint* can be retrieved. His book shows how to use *PowerPoint* without relying on bulleted lists and the reading of slides, and to move into a place where a presentation can really benefit an audience. In an April 2007 blog posting—the blog is also named *Presentation Zen*—Reynolds answers a question about abandoning *PowerPoint*:

Suggesting we abandon *PowerPoint* because it's often (usually?) misused and abused to produce awful presentation visuals is like saying we should dump the idea of 24-hour cable news because so much of it is vacuous rubbish. But whether we're talking about bad TV or boring presentations, shouldn't we blame the content producers not the content medium? When people rail against *PowerPoint* they seem to be saying that *PowerPoint* is a method, and a flawed method at that. (1).

Reynolds believes, as I do, that *PowerPoint* is not really a “method”; it is a tool, and the blame for poor presentations should not land on the software, but on the presenter and user of the software. Reynolds believes that *PowerPoint* can be more than the linear software it is often characterized to be.

Like Reynolds, Nicole Amare believes that *PowerPoint* is more than a program used to create bulleted lists of information. To illustrate that, Amare conducted a study to determine whether *PowerPoint* was helpful or hindering to student performance. Amare's study consisted of four sections (84 students) of an upper level undergraduate technical

writing course. Two sections were instructed traditionally with lecture, handouts, and the teacher at a podium, while the other two sections were instructed using *PowerPoint*. In all sections of Amare's technical writing course, the same material was covered, and students were given an identical pre-test and post-test to measure course performance (300). She concluded that students preferred *PowerPoint* in their classrooms, but that performance scores on the pre and post tests were higher in traditional classroom format. Amare believes that *PowerPoint* popularity with students may be "for the eye candy aspect...rather than because some students are 'visual learners' as they claimed in their attitudes survey" (306). Amare labels these results as "unpredicted" and states several reasons why her students in the traditional sections scored higher on the post-test. She placed the majority of the "blame" on herself as the presenter: "(1) traditional lecture format is more conducive to my presentation style; (2) my *PowerPoint* presentations were not designed as effectively as I thought they were" (305). Though Amare does not delve into the reasons why she believes her *PowerPoint* presentations were not effectively designed, she constantly hints that the success of *PowerPoint* comes from the presenter. What Amare is calling for is not to leave *PowerPoint* behind, but for educators to strike a balance with the use of technology in their classrooms and to shape their presentation skills to benefit their student audience. Although Amare's students in the traditional classroom scored higher on the test, it does not mean that her students in the *PowerPoint* classroom learned nothing—Amare is stronger as a traditional instructor, therefore her students sensed that and retained more from her. Amare observes, and I wholeheartedly agree, that the problem with *PowerPoint* is to establish which audiences and which presenters would be more successful with the help of *PowerPoint* (306). Once

that is established, it is the responsibility of the instructor to shape her pedagogy to meet the needs of her students.

Marilyn Gilroy, although not writing specifically about *PowerPoint* in her article “Using Technology to Revitalize the Lecture: A Model for the Future,” does believe in the power technology has to revitalize the classroom and her students. Like Amare, Gilroy found that her students were very positive about visual learning, the “eye candy” aspect Amare mentions, as opposed to the traditional lecture (10). She attributes this preference to creating an interactive classroom that utilized computer, video, and graphic displays. Her students were consistently intrigued and therefore learned through a variety of traditional and interactive learning activities. Gilroy’s approach is different from Amare’s only because Gilroy did not specifically use *PowerPoint*, but instead used images and graphics to reinforce her lectures. The students responded similarly to the eye candy aspect of both Amare and Gilroy’s lectures, which proves that the use of technology can revitalize the static lecture. For that moment when the teacher steps out of the center of the classroom, lets her students take in an image, and gives them time to form their own thoughts and questions, is when that classroom transforms into a social constructionist classroom.

As students in a lower division English course, Meghan Loisel and Rachel Samantha Galer performed a similar experiment with dissimilar results. There were two professors and four literature classes involved in this study. Each professor had one *PowerPoint* class and one class that did not use *PowerPoint*. The *PowerPoint* classrooms, at the end of every class period, were given a *PowerPoint* presentation that gave background information to the assigned reading (3). To measure satisfaction and

comprehension for this experiment, the *PowerPoint* sections were given a survey. Loisel and Galer concluded that although their classmates enjoyed the visual aspects of *PowerPoint* presentations and preferred them over lecture, most would still prefer a different medium unless the *PowerPoint* presentations were interactive with the audience. Loisel and Galer, like Amare and Gilroy, find that students enjoy the visual stimulus of *PowerPoint*, but what students need to be successful in a classroom that has chosen to use *PowerPoint* is not more flashy diagrams, but interaction with the presenter and the audience. Once again, the responsibility lies with the presenter to keep learning goals and learning needs in mind.

Jennifer Clark, in her 2008 article “*PowerPoint* and Pedagogy: Maintaining Student Interest in University Lectures,” wonders if “student participation is reliant on the effective encouragement of student interest” (40). Clark is the closest I found to applying theory to *PowerPoint*, and she links *PowerPoint* and social constructionist thinking many times in her article. Clark wants her students to take information from a *PowerPoint* and engage with it, work with it, take ownership of it, and understand it by adding and exploring new knowledge and possibilities (40). She proposes that educators achieve this by limiting use of the bulleted list, incorporating more diagrams, sound bites, images, and charts. Clark stresses that facilitating variety and maintaining “intellectual and challenging” content will hold student interest as well as a “competent and interesting” lecturer (42-43). Susan Dinan adds to this conversation in her article “Technology in the Classroom: Microsoft *PowerPoint* Slide Shows.” Dinan demonstrates how *PowerPoint* benefits the diverse learners in her early modern history courses. She claims to have changed her teaching style to “reach more students in the classroom than

usual and to tailor [her] presentation to the learning styles of these students” (453). Although Dinan never mentions theory in this short article, her statements speak to social constructionist thought. She states that she does not “use technology to do anything dramatically new in [her] classroom,” but instead uses the technology to enhance student participation and discussion. For example, when focusing on the Reformation, Dinan enhances classroom dialogue by displaying images of churches and religious ceremonies (453). As Clark also found, Dinan’s students enjoyed the visual aspect of *PowerPoint* in their classroom and preferred it over Dinan’s normal lectures. Although the work of Amare, Gilroy, Loisel and Galer, Clark, and Dinan suggests that students want more opportunities to learn through visual and technological activities, finding a definitive answer to whether *PowerPoint* helps or hinders student learning will take more time and research.

Social constructionist theory privileges active learning over passive learning, voice over silence, and collaboration over hierarchical classroom practices. At face value, *PowerPoint* flies in the face of that pedagogy. However, an instructor who teaches and models this technology in a responsible way will give students time to expand their class notes beyond the ideas that appear in phrases on the screen; will engage students in activities that keep them thinking and cross-referencing information; and will build into the presentation opportunities for students to reflect, question, and discuss those ideas.

Once *PowerPoint* is viewed through theory, the educator will be able to teach the program and teach her students responsibly. The supporters and detractors both claim that the success of the presentation depends on the presenter. For me, this is the bottom line, and this is where I begin my argument. The presenter makes the presentation; therefore,

the presenter should be responsible for the presentation she provides. The responsibility comes from theoretical knowledge of the program, and through this theoretical knowledge *PowerPoint* becomes whatever pedagogical tool the teacher wishes. Clark speculates that presentation software “can allow the lecturer to turn a traditionally conservative practice into a bridge between direct- and constructivist-learning models. This is where the teacher’s role becomes crucial” (40). Clark’s argument is similar to mine in that the teacher is crucial, but Clark never goes into specifics of theory, which I believe is the solution. I contend that a social constructionist approach to the use of *PowerPoint* in the composition classroom could encourage students to become more actively involved in their own learning and could thereby enhance that learning in significant ways.

### *Blackboard* (Course Management Systems)

Course management systems encourage that active learning more overtly. The definition of *Blackboard* from the *Blackboard Learning System* website reads that

The *Blackboard Learning System* is a family of software applications designed to enhance teaching and learning. Intuitive and easy-to-use for instructors, the Blackboard Learning System helps instructors to build course materials online and engage with students in an interactive way (1).

Faculty members can use *Blackboard*, or other brands of CMS’s, to facilitate course organization, communication, collaboration, and assessment. In the University of Wisconsin system, the CMS of choice is D2L<sup>2</sup>, and currently, according to a recent letter

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<sup>2</sup> *Blackboard* is another well-known CMS, and is currently in patent litigation with *D2L*.

sent to all university faculty, there are 149,200 active users enrolled in 14,000 courses on *D2L*. Again, like *PowerPoint*, these are staggering numbers. The availability and use of CMS's is growing day by day, and many faculty members are beginning to apply this technology in their classrooms. But the question of responsible use still remains and the answer lies in theory. By examining this technology through the lens of social constructionist theory, I will illustrate how it can be used more responsibly to maintain a sense of community, allow multiple voices, and lead students toward a broad and effective understanding of that technology. It is important to note that I will focus on the CMS as a classroom tool rather than as a tool for distance learning. I want to explain, through theorizing, how to implement these technologies responsibly into first year composition pedagogy.

Although not as prolific as *PowerPoint* (yet), course management use in the classroom is becoming another topic of debate. A review of the literature shows differing opinions among the disciplines from complete support to a call for resistance. Like the authors in conversation about *PowerPoint*, these authors come close to informing their arguments through theory, but never specifically call for it. Collaboration and teamwork are key words in all of these articles, but they are never connected to a theory that thrives on collaboration, as social constructionist theory does. I will begin with two writers who are not in the discipline of English studies, and finish with two who are in the discipline of English studies and composition.

Catherine McLoughlin and Joe Luca in their 2002 article "A Learner-Centered Approach to Developing Team Skills Through Web-Based Learning and Assessment," focus on collaborative learning in a business or professional setting. With the onset of

online learning and the absence of the teacher in these spaces, McLoughlin and Luca focus on the use of a variety of pedagogies to provide support for collaboration and team skills in an online environment. They believe that in order to become functioning professionals, students need to be attuned to “real life contexts [where] experts work in teams, share knowledge and apply it, revise and transform it through discussion, application and analysis” (572). They contend that all of these skills can be enhanced through online learning to create transferable skills rather than “inert knowledge” (572). McLoughlin and Luca maintain that, through online learning environments, learners assume more responsibility for their own learning, and they “engage in authentic problems and real-life events and develop problem-solving strategies” (578).

Jonathan D. Kibble and his colleagues would agree with McLoughlin and Luca that students need to assume more responsibility for their own learning, and that working collaboratively will benefit their learning as well. Kibble and his colleagues each wrote short articles combined as “Effective Use of Course Management Systems to Enhance Student Learning: Experimental Biology 2007.” Kibble notes that the goal of this symposium was to show how CMS’s engaged student learning. His colleague, Beatriz U. Ramirez challenges the assumption that first-year students are competent Internet users simply because they know how to search the internet for homework and access email (377). Therefore, Ramirez calls for students to gain knowledge of the internet for *learning*, since many of them are only skilled in the internet’s *social use* (377). Ramirez gave her students a self-evaluation of internet skills at the beginning and end of her course, and the results showed that internet literacy, online test performance, and the ability to find websites, download files, and perform critical web searches improved

immensely because of three online questionnaires Ramierez added as participation points for team activities. Since team grades were often high, the students desired to excel with the questionnaires to maintain a high grade, therefore learning more than the social use of the Internet.

Phillip Sokolove, another of these writers, speaks to the discussion forum of *Blackboard* and concludes that his students responded positively through consistent discussion postings for his introductory Biology course. Although Sokolove does not award point credit for the discussion board postings, his strategy for participation is to award the top 10% of online participators with a higher course grade if that participator is on the borderline (378). Sokolove also notes that he and his teaching assistants spent minimal time maintaining the student postings, yet the students kept participating. Sokolove's findings are similar to those of McLoughlin and Luca because of their realization that classes using a CMS can make students responsible for their own learning while the teacher removes himself from center stage. Sokolove's teaching strategy is centered in social constructionist theory because of his goals for active learning and collaboration, but he never mentions his goals in that light.

Jeffrey Kingsbury, another contributor to the biology conversation, claims that CMS use "significantly enhance[s] student learning. The advantages of this educational modality [are to] efficiently distribute learning materials [and improve] communication and collaboration among students and faculty members" (379). Kingsbury, like the others, mentions collaboration as a main key to CMS use in the classroom, but he does not theorize any further. I believe that intentionality is a key to improving one's pedagogy. Understanding the tenets of social constructionist theory can not only guide

college faculty in maintaining student-centered classrooms, but can also affirm their sometimes inherent efforts to do so.

In 2003, Evan Davis and Sarah Hardy published “Teaching Writing in the Space of *Blackboard*.” In this article they analyze *Blackboard* by focusing on the ways that students negotiate its technologies, and they accommodate writing teachers by providing them with suggestions and tips to manage students who occupy *Blackboard*. In the introduction, Davis and Hardy call attention to the shifts in classroom practice at their small liberal arts college:

[T]oo often, *Blackboard*, like other course management systems, is seen simply as a way of presenting a traditional course on-line without altering it. But if that is the only change, then the uses of new technologies may be not revolutionary but conservative, with expensive hardware and software solidifying existing pedagogies rather than prompting new ones (1).

This statement supports my argument for the need to accommodate teachers and students with plans to work within *Blackboard* and other CMS’s. We both note, along with McLoughlin and Luca, that teaching with technology will require new pedagogies. Davis and Hardy call upon the work of Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel de Certeau in their warnings about the widespread but uniformed use of *Blackboard*. They invoke Foucault’s concerns regarding visibility and discipline (3), Bakhtin’s ideas of the complications of dialogue and the awareness of audience and community (4), and Michel de Certeau’s discussion of the space of the city (5). However, although they apply these critical theorists to their discussion, Davis and Hardy do not relate composition theory as thoroughly as I had hoped they would.

They note, for example that Foucault would characterize *Blackboard* as a *panopticon*, a prison designed by social theorist Jeremy Bentham that allowed prisoners to be watched without knowing it. *Blackboard*, they say, like the panopticon, is designed so that instructors know exactly when students log in, what they completed, and what time they logged out. The instructor who uses *Blackboard* to complement her classroom is not unlike a warden in a prison. Davis and Hardy explain, through Foucault, that power and knowledge is altered in the contained space of *Blackboard*, but there are gray areas concerning *Blackboard* that the theory of the prison cannot define. For example, there are spaces in *Blackboard* that do not allow the instructor to know which of her students completed certain tasks. For example, if a student either read a discussion board posting or did not read it, the instructor cannot tie the task of reading (or not reading) to an individual student; there is simply a number of times read next to the posting, but no names are provided. Social constructionist pedagogy can reduce the likelihood of the playing out of the metaphor of the prison in *Blackboard* because it functions as a pedagogy that embraces voice, collaboration, and the instructor as a teacher and learner. Though it is helpful for the instructor to see the frequency of her students participating in *Blackboard*, it is more important she be intentional about her use of *Blackboard*, and be transparent when assigning work within that space. In a social constructionist classroom students should not feel trapped in the visible space of *Blackboard* because they should fully understand *why* they are using *Blackboard* and *what* they are learning. The last section of the Davis and Hardy article contains “Tips on Teaching with *Blackboard*” and within these tips the words *voice*, *audience*, *active learning*, *community*, and *collaboration* are used to describe assignments integrating *Blackboard* and writing

(6). Although Davis and Hardy are not specific about their use of social constructionist theory, it is in there.

Darin Payne, unlike Davis and Hardy, resists the use of CMS's in his 2005 article "English Studies in Levittown: Rhetorics of Space and Technology in Course-Management Software." He focuses on the "evolving virtual spatialities that are shaping our students' intellectual lives and reconfiguring the academic landscape" (484). Payne is concerned that CMS's are not only becoming a staple on college campuses everywhere, but that they are all the same, creating a cliché and reducing the intellectual rigor of the discipline (484). Payne calls for an understanding of how intellectual work in English Studies with faculty and students is shaped by the space of course CMS's. Naming *Blackboard* as his CMS of choice, he "illustrate[s] the ways in which *Blackboard*—as a socially produced and producing space—undermines many of the... goals of English studies" (485 emphasis in original), and he concludes that *Blackboard* is "education-in-a-box [that is] too efficient, too uniform, and too normalizing (485). He believes that universities need to move away from these "homogenizing special practices" and keep higher education as a site for "democratic dialogue and negotiations on difference" (503). An obvious social constructionist at heart, Payne fears that Blackboard will not embrace the social and cultural differences that define university studies. At points in his article, Payne does acknowledge that faculty and students can change some of the uniform features and surveillance options that *Blackboard* holds, and create assignments that work in the space of *Blackboard*, but he maintains that these changes "are limited by the degrees of enabled intervention rooted in the design of the space" (496-497 and 504). Also, Payne states that his "wish is not to produce *Blackboard* by artificially cleansing its

discourse, but [to] provide alternate ways of perceiving and conceiving of it” (499). Unlike Davis and Hardy, Payne does not support accommodating faculty and students with CMS’s, but would rather move in a different direction (497-498). Payne’s last statement is a call for resistance to CMS’s toward more “liberatory ideals rather than capitalist ones” (505). Instead of learning in spaces that he believes are mass produced and controlled by educators, Payne strives for a problem-posing, humanizing, and democratic learning space.

Payne’s argument for space is thorough and detailed, but I stand with Davis and Hardy; we know that *Blackboard* and other CMS’s are realities on most college campuses, so instead of resisting them, we are trying to work with them and take them out of the homogenizing space that Payne places them in. This may sound like my argument folds to the power that CMS’s most definitely hold, but my standpoint is the responsibility of the educator to allow her students to learn the transferable skills that McLoughlin and Luca described at the beginning of this review. In first-year composition, transferable skills will be the most useful to the varied disciplines of the students sitting in the classroom. If the university purchases a CMS, the smart and responsible thing for educators to do is to learn it and teach it through the lens of social constructionist pedagogy that many writing teachers already hope to achieve in their classrooms. If this can be accomplished, which I believe it can, even people like Payne may see some merit in implementing a CMS in the writing classroom.

The review of the literature places these technologies in perspective of how they are viewed today. It is important to hone in on how these technologies can be used responsibly as part of a social constructionist classroom. Pedagogies informed by social

constructionist theory—collaboration, peer-review, writing and process, and writing as a learning tool—will display how *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* can be implemented effectively and responsibly in composition classrooms.

## Social Constructionist Theory

*Student-centered, collaborative, multicultural, and active learning* are all words and phrases associated with social constructionist theory in the field of composition. Composition studies is informed greatly by social constructionist theory in its inclusion of collaborative writing, peer review, writing as process, and writing as a learning tool, to name a few. These pedagogies have grown from the work of composition scholars and professionals who help shape the questions, controversies, and evolving discourses of the field of composition. Victor Villanueva describes this field in the preface to his reader *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*: “Composition studies has divided itself, either to find out what writing is, or how to teach it better, or to discern the degree to which it either removes or bestows power” (xiii). Questions such as these allow scholars to write, quite specifically, on many facets of composition studies. The following literature review brings into conversation three groups of social constructionists that focus on composition. The first group includes scholars of collaborative learning such as Kenneth Bruffee, Mike Rose, Peter Elbow, and Anne Ruggles Gere. The second group, which I label the technologists, includes Cynthia Selfe and some of the writers Carolyn Handa includes in her book *Computers and Community: Teaching Composition in the Twenty-First Century*. The last group is comprised of scholars who focus on the cultural aspects of the composition classroom, such as Patricia Bizzell, David Bartholomae, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano.

When I think about social construction, I think about students as the center of the classroom. I imagine discussion and movement occurring throughout class time, and students depending on other students to help further their knowledge. I see peer review transpiring weekly, if not more often, and the students becoming comfortable with each other. In a social constructionist classroom, students learn about their peers' communities and how different they may be from their own, and this learning helps construct their own knowledge to consider a broader range of thought. Kenneth Bruffee asserts this very idea in his book *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. He states that "our students, however poorly prepared academically, did not come to us as blank slates. They arrived in our classes already deeply acculturated, already full-fledged, competent members (as we were, too) of some community or another" (17). Although students do not walk into the composition classroom as members of that discourse community, they walk in as members of several other communities, and once they begin learning about each other's communities, they are exposed to an extensive scope of available knowledge.

Collaboration is a key word in social constructionist thought. Peter Elbow, though commonly identified as an expressivist, is placed in this category because of his belief in the value of peer review. In his book *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow states that "[t]he original, commonest, easiest-to-produce kind of interaction is that between people. If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to" (49). Elbow wants students and teachers to understand the importance of collaboration and peer-review in the writing classroom. He stresses the value of writing as a social activity and encourages teachers of writing to convince their

students likewise. Mike Rose agrees with Elbow because Rose himself, in his many narratives in *Lives on the Boundary*, describes his growth as a learner not through being lectured to, but being mentored and taught in smaller, and sometimes out-of-class, sessions. He brought that special small group learning into his tutoring sessions and eventually, into his classroom: “My method was simple. I chose four students and had each of them take sections of the test again, asking them questions as they did so, encouraging them to talk as they tried to figure out an item” (217). Rose asserts that students working together learn the value of collaborative problem solving that can carry them through any discipline and beyond academic life. Kenneth Bruffee also defines collaborative learning as people distributing “knowledge and authority among themselves, taking it upon themselves to help each other.... Assume[ing] one another’s will to do the job” (21). Further, Bruffee states that students who take part in collaborative learning will learn more together than they could ever learn alone (21). The social constructionist classroom survives based on the interaction students have with each other. Instead of a classroom full of individuals, the social constructionist classroom becomes one large group of learners—a learning community. Anne Ruggles Gere, who researched century-old to present day writing groups in her book *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, also shares a common thread with these scholars. She asserts that, although the polished prose a writing group produces is important, “even more significant is the process of the group, the means by which individuals experience and eventually become part of a literate community” (123). The heart of a social constructionist classroom is hearing each others’ voices, and interacting throughout class

time. A quiet classroom does not a collaborative classroom, nor a social constructionist classroom, make.

Social constructionists hold a unique epistemological view of knowledge. Epistemology asks, “How do we come to know what we know?” and social constructionists’ answer is that people come to know what they know because of their social surroundings, learned values, and previous knowledge. Their scope of knowledge depends on what students already know and the knowledge they gain from the communities they belong to. When students enter a new community, such as their first college writing course, they will view this experience through the lens of their previous knowledge of classrooms, teachers, and other factors. Making the classroom student-centered through use of collaborative and active learning instead of teacher-centered transmission allows teachers to accommodate the diverse learning styles of each student. Through discussion and collaborative projects, students will create new knowledge with that which was previously there and will become a part of a new community offering opportunities for further knowledge.

The cultural aspects of the composition classroom become increasingly important as an educator builds an understanding of social constructionist thought. In the first sentence of their essay, “Embracing a Multicultural Rhetoric,” Bonnie Lisle and Sandra Mano assert that a “hot topic” in composition today is diversity, but that the “talk” does not match classroom practice (12). Although there is concern in the field of composition that the diverse qualities of the students need to be met, there are insufficient examples of sorely needed change in the classroom. Lisle and Mano call for a rhetoric that fosters “awareness of varied audiences, purposes, and social contexts” that will allow students to

examine their cultural community with the communities they encounter in academia. Creating a multidisciplinary classroom where students explore new communities or cultures through the lens of the other empowers the students to think critically, which is a foundational tool of social constructionist theory (26). Educators building social constructionist classrooms will focus their attention on the wants and needs of each student and will build their pedagogy from there. Another scholar who voices a problem with the culture of the composition classroom is Patricia Bizzell. In her essay, “What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College,” Bizzell focuses on students with the least preparation for college. She and many scholars before her, such as Mina Shaughnessy, stress the need to teach composition to benefit *each* student. Meeting each student “where they are” is as close to the heart of social constructionist thinking as is collaboration.

Social constructionists know that they must consider students as individuals. They ask questions such as: 1) where they came from, 2) how and why they are in college, 3) why they chose the chair in the front or back of the classroom, and more pieces of information that will help them best *meet* the needs of the student. Social constructionists believe in learning from “conversation,” which John Trimbur declares is a “code word to talk about knowledge and teaching and learning as social—not cognitive.” He asserts that learning “cannot be understood strictly on cognitive grounds; it means rather joining new communities and taking part in new conversations” (465). Meeting students “where they are” means determining how individual students learn best and then varying one’s pedagogy to help meet their needs. This attention can then lead to more successful involvement in conversations that will broaden and heighten their knowledge and

awareness of the world around them. Both of these steps are vital to creating a social constructionist classroom.

David Bartholomae also speaks of the social and academic needs of first-year writers in his article “Inventing the University.” Bartholomae stresses that whether students are considered “basic” writers or not, they are aware “that something special or something different is required when [they write] for an academic classroom” (644-645). Although students are unfamiliar with the discourse conventions and their new surroundings, they endeavor to “write their way into a new community” without always knowing the structure and thought process of that community (645). Bartholomae believes that regardless of the cultural community students come from, they know when they must learn to speak another community’s language, or the language of the university. These scholars all agree that how and where a student was raised and how that student was educated will define how that student will continue to learn.

This literature suggests that scholars are talking about a learning theory that is also important to technology in the classroom. Social constructionists believe that every student can be reached, and although there has been a lot of “talk” and little practice of accepting the diversity of learning styles in the classroom, as Lisle and Mano indicate, this talk is what prepares educators to take steps toward practice and improvement in their classrooms. I believe the topic of technology in the composition classroom needs more attention in this discourse community. Taking the time to learn, view, and teach composition through the lens of social constructionist theory will benefit every aspect of the classroom, and it will especially benefit the implementation of technology in the composition classroom. First-year composition instructors can take control of technology

through a theoretical understanding of its use rather than letting technology take over for its own sake.

## CHAPTER 3: STRATEGIES

Use of *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* that is informed by composition theory and pedagogy will ensure that these technologies will not only be appropriate for a social constructionist classroom, but can enhance it. Common composition pedagogies such as writing as process, collaboration, peer review, and writing to learn can become more interactive with *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* rather than less, as some critics believe.

I want my students to become capable members of the technology community in the study of composition. It is important today for students to be aware of the emerging technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is more important that they learn how to employ these technologies responsibly and understand how the technologies will benefit not only their time but also their learning. I will explore technology informed by social constructionist theory which enables me to teach my students and answer their questions in a way that will help them both learn the technology and use it to its fullest extent. In my classroom, technology will not be the center of the class, nor will it be limited simply to word processing. Instead, it will create a balance between the traditional and technological classroom. *PowerPoint*, for example, is consistently misused in classrooms every day because its value as a learning tool in the social constructionist classroom is blocked by lecturing from text-filled slides with no discussion—a practice which, in turn, silences students. Viewing, learning, and teaching *PowerPoint* through the lens of social construction theory will enable an instructor to build a presentation that calls for students to be active and collaborative. Instead of allowing students to sit through a *PowerPoint* presentation furiously copying down slide upon slide and not speaking (or listening), social constructionist pedagogy will provide students with questions instead of verbatim

definitions and bullet points as spring boards for conversation instead of text-heavy slides that divert their attention.

Learning technology in the composition classroom will be different from one student to the next, and teachers must use the flexibility of the chosen technology to meet the needs of each student. One student may have been surrounded by computers from an early age, while another may have had only limited access before entering the university. Social constructionist theory suggests that each of these students will have an equal chance to learn the material in their own way if the instructor takes seriously the responsibilities of a student-centered classroom. Although some students will have more experience with a computer, they might not have had that experience with a course management system like *Blackboard*. Although one student may be better at navigating her way around the Windows operating system, Internet Explorer, Facebook, and MySpace, both she and the inexperienced student will start from the same place with *Blackboard*, and learn through their previous knowledge. Some may believe the experienced student will have the upper hand with this learning, but that is not always true. The more experienced student also comes to the classroom with previous opinions and knowledge that may hinder her use of *Blackboard*. For example, the experienced student may only utilize the communication capabilities of *Blackboard* because that is what she enjoys about Facebook, therefore discarding *Blackboard* as a learning tool. The inexperienced student, however, approaches the computer and *Blackboard* with no preconceived ideas. Both students will struggle, but never the same struggle, and this is precisely what social constructionists should see when they look around their classroom; every student is different, but every student can learn and will learn from where they are.

It is important, if not more important today than in the past, to pay specific attention to the non-traditional students who never relied on a computer for their education and who are fearful and resistant about technology. Non-traditional students often fear that they will “break” the computer—one wrong click may cause it to crash—or that they will become so lost in a program that they will not find their way out. Teaching composition at Globe University has opened my eyes to the learning styles of non-traditional students. These students, though hesitant, must be aware of the prominent position that technology holds in the classroom and the workplace, and learn that technology is a benefit. What is different is the process of that learning, and this is another opportunity for educators to be in tune with students’ needs and to meet non-traditional students where they are. The instructor must introduce technology to these students not as the “only” way to learn, but inform them that technology will be a part of their future whether they are planning to go to graduate school or start their own business. Providing a balance between technological and traditional learning will, hopefully, ease some of the fears these students have about technology. Non-traditional students decide to return to school to make changes in their lives, to move up in the company they currently work for, to get into a new career, or to finally start pursuing their dream for a doctorate. Although they may be fearful of what is new, they will understand that knowledge of the “new” will allow them to gain the expertise required to make their career or life aspirations a reality. More than any first-year student, “non-trads” have probably weighed the pros and cons of their decision to go back to school multiple times; they are back in school to change and better themselves for the future, and the future, no matter what the discipline, will include technology.

Access to technology in K-12 education will play an important role in the future learning of these students, but it is not the deciding factor in the success of the student in the university. Using or learning with technology may be more difficult for students who did not have access to technology in their early education, but those students will be given the opportunity to “catch up” upon entrance into the university. In college, limited access, I believe, is less of an issue. If a college student does not have a computer at home or in a dorm room, he or she will have access to computers and other technology on campus and in classrooms throughout every university. Though computer access may be more of a challenge for students who do not own their own computer, who have jobs that keep them off campus until class time, or who may have other responsibilities at home, the university does offer access to technology for each student; some campuses even include laptops in a student’s tuition package. The experience each student brings to technology is another issue of diversity that educators must take into account as they plan and teach their classes.

When considering *PowerPoint* and course management systems, it is helpful to understand how the companies that produce the software define their product. Through these definitions, the public has an idea of how these technologies are designed and marketed for use. Once more, the definition of *PowerPoint* from the Microsoft Office website reads:

Microsoft Office *PowerPoint* 2007 enables users to quickly create high-impact, dynamic presentations, while integrating workflow and ways to easily share information. From the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface

to the new graphics and formatting capabilities, Office *PowerPoint* 2007 puts the control in your hands to create great-looking presentations (1).

It is safe to say that this definition would not sway composition teachers towards this product, and instead, may push them away. “Great-looking” and “dynamic” presentations speak not to academe but to businesses and boardrooms. It is easy to understand why there is a backlash against *PowerPoint*; from the definition above it is clearly not marketed for the classroom or for educational use. It is time, though, to make this a useful classroom tool. *PowerPoint* is readily available on college campuses, and there is a good chance that this program resides on each student’s laptop hard drive. For *PowerPoint* to be a feature of computers and not be used for education is a waste. If educators will take the time to see how *PowerPoint* can be informed by social constructionist theory, the educational uses will surface.

While the definition of *PowerPoint* is targeted towards the conference room, *Blackboard*, the most popular brand name of course management software, was created as an educational tool to enhance the classroom. Once more, *Blackboard* is defined as a family of software applications designed to enhance teaching and learning. Intuitive and easy-to-use for instructors, the *Blackboard Learning System* helps instructors to build course materials online and engage with students in an interactive way. Institutions around the world use the *Blackboard Learning System* to: create powerful learning content using a variety of Web-based tools; encourage student interaction, small-group work, and peer knowledge sharing; facilitate students or groups using engaging assignments that cause them to reflect; enhance student’s

critical thinking skills using interactive tools; leverage student participation, communication, and collaboration; evaluate a student's progress using a rich set of evaluation and assessment capabilities (1).

*Blackboard* provides opportunities for focused learning and engaging with students and instructors in a variety of ways. This definition is filled with social constructionist phrases like “small-group work,” “enhance...critical thinking,” and “collaboration”—although the conscious use of constructionist theory of *Blackboard* is still hard to find in classrooms I am familiar with. While *Blackboard* was designed for educational value, its use as a tool to improve writing is not specifically stated. However, using these technologies to enhance writing as process, collaborative learning, peer review, and writing as a learning tool will illustrate that these technologies are not only beneficial for *PowerPoint*'s great looking presentations and *Blackboard*'s knowledge sharing, but also as writing and learning tools in a social constructionist classroom.

### Writing as Process

Writing as process is a familiar concept in composition and in social constructionist theory. The recursive steps in any writing process include prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. This concept is common practice in many college classrooms, but some educators may not recognize how writing as process can apply to *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard*. In my analysis, these two applications are highly relevant to specific steps in writing processes. Writing as process appeals to social constructionists because each step in this process can be molded to meet every student's needs. To be successful, each step of a writing process can benefit from the social constructionist goals of collaborative and active learning.

When building a *PowerPoint* presentation, a student should move through each step of the writing process as they would for any other paper that is assigned. A good *PowerPoint* presentation includes prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. In the prewriting stage the student makes note of what information she wants to include, how she wants to incorporate her ideas, and how she will include her audience. In the drafting stage, the student begins writing her slide material and organizes the slides into a coherent order for her audience. Practicing with a listener who can provide feedback is as helpful at this stage as peer review can be with a paper draft. In the drafting stage the student will also practice vocalizing her information to her audience. When revising a *PowerPoint* presentation the student again practices vocalizing her slides and deciphers where more information is needed, where she can incorporate audience participation, and also where she can clarify her information. This may seem like a simple process, but since *PowerPoint* is not usually viewed as a writing tool, it is important to call students' attention to the similarities inherent in this process with that of preparing a written draft.

While *PowerPoint* is proven to be a capable platform for the writing process, *Blackboard* also accomplishes each step of the writing process well. In my composition class, nearly every week students are prewriting on *Blackboard*. One example is an assignment that I call the "current event discussion." For this assignment the students must find a news story, explain why they chose the story, where they stand on the argument(s), and why they think this story is important for other students to be familiar with. Then they post this assignment on *Blackboard* in the discussion forum, and each student responds to at least two other current event postings. This task would typically be assigned when students are learning about argument, usually leading up to a "letter to the

editor” for example, but it can be used for many other writing assignments as well. The ideas that flow in these postings are best described as prewriting. These discussion postings are conversations and debates that teach the students something new about their current event. Not only are the students collecting knowledge about their topic, but they are also learning about their peer community. This assignment allows students to construct new knowledge about the topic they chose, as well as the topics their peers chose, and also to broaden their understanding through the reply postings from their peers. Once this assignment is completed, the other stages of the writing process emerge. After reviewing the reply postings, students will begin drafting their letter to the editor. They will post their drafts to a discussion board and complete the *Blackboard* peer review to be described later in this chapter. The peer review leads to the revision stage, during which students will revise their papers by considering the comments and questions posted from their peer discussion. Once revised, the students will then, and only then, go back into their paper and begin editing for sentence-level errors. Finally, the students will post their letters to the editor in a discussion forum and comment once more on two other letters written by their peers. The instructor, then, will have access to the discussion boards to view this entire process for proper evaluation—not only of students’ writing but of their peer review performance as well.

## Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is a concept that, as Kenneth Bruffee states, is “underdeveloped, underused, and frequently misunderstood” but is definitely “not something new under the sun” (1, 4). It can include working in pairs, in groups, or as a class. Activities can include brainstorming, active listening, peer review, and critical

discussion. It is a belief of social constructionists that all learning is collaborative.

Although students may process new thoughts while privately writing their journal entry for the week, none of those thoughts are born from that student alone. Their social surroundings, previous knowledge, and new knowledge will shape and broaden their understanding of each thought they have, whether private or public. When used in the classroom, collaborative learning places an infinite amount of knowledge in the hands of the student. Infinite because the student can decide how much he wants to learn. For example, the vocal student will learn from the discussion by presenting her thoughts to the group and acknowledging the feedback, while the quiet learner will also learn from the discussion by actively listening and taking notes. Bruffee explains that “[c]ollaborative learning gives students practice in working together when the stakes are relatively low, so that they can work effectively together later when the stakes are high” (1). Ultimately, collaborative learning teaches students two important points. One, they learn to “depend on one another rather than [on] the authority of the teacher” and two “they learn to construct knowledge as it is constructed in the academic disciplines and professions” (1). Both *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* are valuable learning tools for collaborative learning.

Edward Tufte, one of the critics of *PowerPoint*, states early on in his book, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, that *PowerPoint* is “entirely presenter-oriented, and not content-oriented, not audience-oriented” (4). Tufte believes that *PowerPoint* slides “replace serious analysis with chartjunk, over-produced layouts, cheerleader logotypes and branding, and corny clip art” (4). As a social constructionist, I believe Tufte offers a limited view of the capabilities of *PowerPoint*. First, stating that *PowerPoint* is entirely

presenter-oriented appears to assume that the individual preparing the presentation is simply doing it for herself rather than for the audience that will listen to the presentation. By saying “presenter oriented” Tufte excludes the possibility that students can work together to prepare a *PowerPoint* presentation. The “serious analysis” that Tufte claims is replaced by “chartjunk” is entirely the choice of the presenter, and therefore cannot be a general statement about slide use. Aside from these arguments, Tufte does not acknowledge that the “cognitive style” he describes can be changed. By examining the potential of *PowerPoint* as a learning tool for the listeners, the presenter will fade from center stage and allow the content and audience to take a step into the conversation. Viewing *PowerPoint* as a conversation instead of a presentation will help transform *PowerPoint* into an active learning tool. Students acquire the skills of active listening, note taking, and questioning while listening to a responsible presentation. When students can no longer simply stare at slides, but instead, must participate and ask and answer questions to gain the understanding needed to achieve course goals, they will begin to learn through *PowerPoint* in an active way. By creating a presentation that is active and helps broaden students’ knowledge instead of mandate it, *PowerPoint* turns from “presenter-oriented” to community oriented. Keeping in mind the social nature of writing, the presenter will be aware of the community to whom she is presenting while preparing her presentation.

Assigning a collaborative project using *PowerPoint* would teach students to work together on brainstorming, negotiating, planning, designing, analyzing an audience, and presenting. They would learn that *PowerPoint* is more than one person standing up front and reading off of slides. I know of a first-year college writing course that put students

into groups to study the gender roles illustrated in television sitcoms or reality TV shows. Each group was to create a presentation for the class, and each group chose to use *PowerPoint*, since *PowerPoint* is only presentation software available at UWEC. The responsible educator will work with what is available and add social constructionist thinking to the discourse community. Unfortunately, this collaborative project did not meet the goals the instructors had in mind because they were not intentional with their use of *PowerPoint*, nor were they transparent when assigning the group project. While the students had fun presenting to the class, the learning tools that could have been embedded in this project were missing. The instructors should have intentionally taken the students through each step of the process, or at least noted along the way: choosing the TV show, brainstorming its gendered message, reading sources to support their responses, forming an argument, analyzing the audience of peers, selecting the segments to display, writing the text, planning a discussion (not a lecture) and presenting it. The instructors did not do these things, so the students fell into the Tufte trap. Their presentations, although fun to watch, did not benefit the audience beyond visual stimulation. It is irresponsible to allow students to fall in to the *PowerPoint* trap that Tufte describes in his book; this “epidemic” of poor presentation style can be remedied. If educators are aware of the current use of *PowerPoint*, and are also aware of what social constructionist thought can bring to the software, than it would not be educationally sound for teachers to teach *PowerPoint* in any other way. It is time to make the software work *for* educators through theory.

*Blackboard* also supports collaborative learning, and from the definition provided is marketing itself as a student centered learning tool. *Blackboard* names “student

interaction, small-group work, and peer knowledge sharing” as the goals of the system and goals that are central to collaborative learning. *Blackboard* opens up a safe, online space for students to apply the collaborative skills of brainstorming, negotiating, planning, designing, discussing, and audience awareness. The same skills are studied through collaborative learning with *PowerPoint* as they are with *Blackboard* because collaborative learning is an adaptable concept. For example, when assigning a *PowerPoint* group presentation, one could also assign a discussion board for each group for the sole purpose of brainstorming ideas. Not only does this provide a way for the teacher to observe her students’ progress, but it is an excellent approach to start conversations between students who would not typically offer their opinions or ideas in class.

## Peer Review

Peer review is a type of collaboration, and there has been much composition and social constructionist discourse on this concept. Scholars focus on all elements of the peer review—the students, the writing, the social and cognitive contexts, and the results of peer discussion and evaluation of each others’ work. Social constructionists uphold peer review because it takes the teacher out of the center of the classroom, has students working collaboratively, and ultimately broadens each student’s knowledge of the topics discussed in the peer review session. Peer review or peer response is an example of a student activity in what Linda Flower calls a “teacher-designed community” (742). In most classrooms, peer review consists of a pair or small group of students reading each others’ papers and responding to questions that are usually provided by the instructor. Although this type of peer review session often benefits the students involved, there are

always the students who, as Flower speculates, go to “great lengths to avoid evaluating each other and...maintain smooth social relations” (742). In my experience, this is a common occurrence on peer review day: one student says “I liked it. Nothing was wrong” and the other student says (even though he or she may have a point of contention), “Same here. Everything looks good.” As a teacher who has heard that conversation in excess after only one year of teaching writing, I began to wonder what could be done to make peer review a more helpful process for all students, but especially those who are afraid to assert their thoughts and ideas in the classroom.

This experience led me to take *PowerPoint* out of its original box, away from its definition, and begin thinking about a *PowerPoint* presentation as a written paper. The process of peer review as explained above can be implemented with *PowerPoint* presentations as well as with paper drafts. To create a successful presentation, each student must perform research, reflect on audience, choose main and supporting points, organize, leave room for discussion and explanation of ideas, prompt questions, and cover his or her topic carefully. The differences between a presentation and a paper are actually minimal. Although a written conference paper may be twenty pages long, a twenty minute presentation on the same topic will require just as much work. Listeners, like traditional peer reviewers, can critique and offer suggestions that will facilitate the creation of a presentation as much as it will benefit a required paper. Take, for example, a *PowerPoint* presentation on the character of Moses in Edward P. Jones’ popular work of fiction, *The Known World*. As a written paper benefits from being read aloud, so does a *PowerPoint* presentation in the peer review stage. The writer will present for his partner or group, and like a traditional peer review the listeners will respond thoughtfully to

questions prepared by the instructor, and add questions derived from their own perceptions of Moses. The listeners will also have the unique opportunity to respond to the many elements that formulate a *PowerPoint* presentation such as the graphics or visuals chosen, the presentation style and voice of the presenter, slide organization, audience awareness, and the overall cohesiveness of the presentation. Again, this process is not unlike a peer review of a written paper. What is important for a written paper is important for an effective *PowerPoint* presentation. Like a reader of a written paper, the listener needs to be led through the presentation in a way that allows her to grasp the main ideas and goals of the presentation. The writer will then take his peer's responses into consideration as he revises his presentation.

Likewise, the discussion board feature of *Blackboard* used for peer review would solve the problem for students who are afraid to use their voice in the classroom or write on a peer's draft. Students will find this approach not only intriguing but different enough to inspire real engagement. The discussion board feature allows the instructor to set up a forum. The forum would include a title similar to "Peer Review 1," and students would "meet" online in that forum. Within the forum the students can respond to each other via what *Blackboard* labels "discussion threads." The discussion thread is comparable to an email message because students can reply, delete, and include file attachments within each thread.

Once the students understand the *Blackboard* process, they will still split into groups of two or three or four, as in a traditional peer review. At that point, they will attach their papers in a discussion thread and then use the comment feature offered through Microsoft Word (see Figure 1) to comment on their peer's draft outside of class.

The students will require some boundaries for this type of peer review. One would be the time allowed for this process; having a deadline on the discussion board for posting, commenting, and reviewing will be necessary so that all students have the same timeline. Also, the students must be equipped with some peer review questions ahead of time, to ensure a form of structure that would be present in the classroom. As with traditional peer review, the students could be encouraged to create their own questions and organize the peer review to respond to their specific concerns. Once both or all drafts have been commented on, the students can reply to the original discussion thread attaching the comment version of the paper. Then, students can begin an online discussion of these comments which is essentially an online peer review.

Almost every girl looks in a magazine and sees another girl that they wished they looked like or got as much attention, and that is exactly what I do when I look at my sister. My sister, Alissa, reminds me of a beauty queen. Alissa is an average size girl standing 5'4" and weighing about 110 pounds. Her thin long light brown, straight hair shapes here face adequately. Her hair comes about half way down her back. My sister's hair is always done to perfection, as if she was going out somewhere special. She spends hours every morning curling her hair in big curls, little curls, and pinning it up. Her sparkly bright blue eyes light up her face, and her make-up is placed on her face as if it was done by a professional. The cover up is spread so evenly, like it's her natural skin color. She places her black eye liner on so perfect it makes her bright blue sparkly eyes stand out like a hunter in blaze orange stands out in the woods. Her face is always smug free. There is always a bright warming, friendly smile on her face. Her smile is so radiant, she has the perfect smile, with her white as snow on a bright sunny day teeth that really make her smile noticeable from far away. She is always dressed to preppy perfection trying on five six outfits before she is completely satisfied. They always bring out her personality. Her shirts show her since of style, while her pants show off her curves. Her outfits are fun, and colorful, bring out her

**Comment [CAH1]:** If you think she is a beauty queen. Say it. "To me, my sister Alissa is a beauty queen"

**Comment [CAH2]:** Take out one or two describing words here.

**Comment [CAH3]:** Word choice. Think of something else. Immaculately?

**Comment [CAH4]:** You can probably make this one sentence. "Her hair comes halfway down her back, and is always done..."

**Comment [CAH5]:** Take out comma.

**Comment [CAH6]:** Maybe simply say, "looks professional"

**Comment [CAH7]:** Take out

**Comment [CAH8]:** Very good. I like this image.

**Comment [CAH9]:** Do you mean, smudge?

**Comment [CAH10]:** I think I would take this out, I see what you are doing, but I think "white as snow" gives a good image to the reader.

**Comment [CAH11]:** fix to six

**Comment [CAH12]:** Say what they is...her clothes, her outfits...

Fig. 1. Example of the Microsoft Word comment feature from the fall 2008 section of Foundations of Writing II at Globe University in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Allowing students the freedom to create their own peer review session in pairs will possibly make them more comfortable than sitting in a classroom trying to thoughtfully comment while the teacher is present and listening. This method may also take away some of the anxiety of maintaining those smooth social connections with peers. Would this process be beneficial for every peer review in a quarter or semester-long writing class? No, it would not be, because the balance of traditional and technological learning is imperative to prepare students for classrooms not using *Blackboard*. But allowing students to learn the diverse qualities of *Blackboard* and to perform familiar activities through more than one medium is beneficial for their understanding of the social nature of writing and of modern technology.

The above image, Figure 1, illustrates the comment feature available with Microsoft Word. This feature is helpful for both or all students involved in an online peer review. Instead of listing comments and directing the reader to the exact word or sentence, for example, “the word “smug” should be “smudge” in the sentence number eleven,” the comment feature allows the peer reviewer to highlight the area of contention and “add a comment” which enables the reviewer to type in their thoughts. The highlighted portion stands out from the rest of the text and a dotted line leads the writer to the correct comment. The above student varied the length of her comments, though there is no word limit. This allows the peer reviewer the space to thoughtfully reflect on the writer’s paper without feeling confined. Again, students who do not typically voice their thoughts aside from “It was good,” in a traditional peer review session may appreciate the non-judgmental and unrestricted use of the comment feature.

## Writing to Learn

For far too long students and teachers have thought of writing simply as a tool for communication and not a tool for learning; students are assigned papers to show their teacher what they know instead of what they have learned, and they are often simply assigned a paper and left to their own devices to produce it. Discourse in composition attests to a strong belief in the concept of writing to learn. Writing to learn is best defined as a student thinking critically and gaining knowledge as he or she writes. Writing to learn is necessary not only in the composition classroom, but throughout any university that supports writing across the curriculum (WAC). For example, when a student is assigned a research paper, she does not include everything she has learned in the final revision, but instead, she pulls out the important points. The pieces of knowledge that are not part of the final paper are not discarded by the student, but instead become part of the student's knowledge, no matter in what discipline the student is writing. Writing to learn allows students to internalize information better than if they were lectured to or told to memorize many facts to complete mechanical exercises. Writing to learn is closely associated with the previous three pedagogies, and it empowers the student to broaden and shape his or her knowledge while writing. Through brainstorming, questioning, researching, outlining, and drafting students sift through an enormous amount of information to create a written paper. Each of these strategies for writing can be enhanced with *PowerPoint* or *Blackboard*, and in some cases, both.

When teaching writing to learn with *PowerPoint*, the instructor must, as advised earlier in this chapter, view a *PowerPoint* presentation as a written paper. Learning how

to write a thoughtful, active *PowerPoint* presentation will not happen on the first try. When students are writing to learn with *PowerPoint*, they will be aware of an active audience, their own writer's voice, the collaborative nature of the process, and opportunities for audience participation. They will understand that the content of their slides is geared towards their audience and will be a learning tool for their audience, and not merely a presentation tool for themselves. For example, during the process of writing a research paper, it is important for students to work intensely with their topics before writing a first draft. Assigning a *PowerPoint* presentation for a topic outline is one example of writing to learn with *PowerPoint*. Students will include their main and supporting ideas and will be held accountable to explain what questions they will answer within the chosen topic. To succeed with this project, students will need to complete research, organize facts, and consider their audience, while also anticipating the audience's questions or concerns. This process will not only teach students to create a thorough presentation, but it will teach them the critical thinking that is involved in the process.

While preparing a *PowerPoint* presentation is similar to preparing a written paper, the best practices for *Blackboard* as a tool for writing to learn are inherent in the student centered structure of the program. Brainstorming, questioning, researching, outlining, and drafting are all possible with *Blackboard*. Although I have addressed these strategies earlier in this chapter with *Blackboard*, I have not discussed journaling, a vital element of each aforementioned strategy. The journal is a central component of writing to learn. Maintaining a reading journal, a writing journal, or a reflective journal facilitates the questioning and critical thinking required when using writing to learn, and *Blackboard* is

an ideal tool for instructors to use when assigning journal writing. The instructor has the administrative authority to decide whether documents posted to *Blackboard* are made public or are only available to the instructor. This option will accommodate those students who would not want their journal accessible to their peers, and it is probably the best option for instructors unless the entire class would benefit from the journal being made public. Allowing students to complete their journals outside of class in a familiar, non-threatening environment will encourage students to ask questions they would not typically ask and consider topics they may not consider when asked what interests them in class. For example, an advisor told me about a concerned student who came to her apprehensive about his paper topic of gay marriage. His main concern was the reaction of his classmates. The student had chosen his topic because it sparked his interest, but he was ready to leave that topic and move on in fear of being judged. A *Blackboard* journal can serve as a sounding board for students like this one, providing a place where the judgment of peers will not be restrictive. This privacy allows the student time to brainstorm his thoughts, ask questions, research, and obtain feedback from his instructor which will hopefully give him the confidence to be comfortable with his topic.

These four composition pedagogies of writing as process, collaboration, peer review, and writing to learn must be well informed by composition theory and social constructionist theory. These theory-based pedagogies can guide educators who currently use technology in their classroom, as well as those who have not yet endeavored to use technology, towards an understanding of responsible use. Without this knowledge and acceptance of responsibility, *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* will continue to be utilized for the transmission style of teaching in the first-year composition classroom. Abandoning

the opportunity to complicate these technologies through composition theory and social constructionist theory will only perpetuate the current criticism instead of demonstrating the influence that *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* encompass as learning tools.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To create a responsible balance between traditional and technological coursework in first-year composition, instructors need a theoretical understanding of the teaching and learning of the technologies they choose. *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* are two programs that can enhance writing as process, collaboration, peer review, and writing to learn which are, by nature, integrated pedagogies. The concept of collaboration, for example, is inherent in peer review sessions and in the brainstorming activities of prewriting, while writing to learn is a core value of all the abovementioned pedagogies. Responsibly applying these four pedagogies to *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* can transform a technology-driven classroom into a social constructionist classroom. If the instructor is intentional about her use of these pedagogies, and transparent in her teaching of the technological features of the programs, the students will understand why and how they are learning, and they will retain what they have experienced.

Best known for his developmental work with *Moodle*, a brand of open source course management software, Martin Dougiamas defines social constructionism as a theory that

views learners as actively engaged in making meaning, and teaching with that approach looks for what students can analyse, investigate, collaborate, share, build and generate based on what they already know, rather than what facts, skills, and processes they can parrot. To do this effectively, a teacher needs to be a learner and a researcher, to strive for greater awareness of the environments and the participants in a given teaching

situation in order to continually adjust [his or her] actions to engage students in learning (5).

The concepts that Dougiamas defines for students and instructors, in this short quotation, are the ideas that create a social constructionist classroom, and the skills that students and instructors must encompass to be successful. Dougiamas channels Kenneth Bruffee's thought of students as collaborative learners, Paulo Freire's belief that learning and teaching have little to do with memorization, and Anne Ruggles Gere's approach (and all social constructionists) that it is essential to meet students "where they are." Teaching *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* through the understanding of social constructionist theory will allow for the students to analyze, investigate, and share, while the technologies will also implore the instructor to be not only the teacher, but also a learner.

"Students will float to the mark you set" (26), Mike Rose wrote in the second chapter of his eloquent and powerful book, *Lives on the Boundary*. It is this phrase on which I have solely based my pedagogy. Dougiamas's above quotation, I believe, carries with it the same sentiment and urgency as Rose's words. Rose assures educators that students will learn if you hold them accountable, and Dougiamas provides the method that will allow students to float to that "mark" referred to by Rose. But first, educators must understand that they are the most important constituent of their pedagogy.

Responsible use of technology in the composition classroom is imperative for instructors who want to use it to improve their teaching and their students' learning. To teach responsibly, with *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard*, instructors should be aware of the programs' features as well as the limitations. The "banking" method of teaching with

technology is irresponsible, especially with the programs that require the students to have a deeper understanding of the programs' use as writing tools.

There are three main components of “responsible use” and all pertain directly to the instructor. First, the instructor needs to fully understand the functions, capabilities, and limitations of the technologies she chooses to use. When I chose to implement *Blackboard* in my writing class, I participated in a four hour workshop on *Blackboard* before I stepped in front of my students. Since the benefit of a workshop is not always possible, asking colleagues or testing *Blackboard* by trial and error are two efficient ways to learn the program quickly. I received the best advice from my colleagues, who had found through their own experience what *Blackboard* can do, and what it can not do. *PowerPoint*, however, becomes difficult to understand when one has been subjected to its misuse in classrooms for years. I mentioned in chapter one that students must unlearn what they have learned about *PowerPoint*, which is absolutely true for instructors as well. Viewing *PowerPoint* through theory and starting over with an understanding of its functions and capabilities is imperative for instructors who want to use it as a learning tool instead of a device for creating quick and easy presentations.

After the instructor has achieved a clear understanding of the technologies, she needs to *teach* those same functions, capabilities, and limitations to the students so they will understand them too; therefore, the instructor needs to be transparent by letting her students know what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how it will help them achieve the goals of the course. There is a disparity between an instructor that understands the technology and assigns it to her students, and the instructor that understands the technology and takes the time to not only introduce the technology, but

also gives examples and answers questions before assigning it to her students. Every question that I had while learning *Blackboard*, and every reservation that I had about *PowerPoint*, I was certain my students would have as well. And those questions and reservations are the initial items I share with students as technology is implemented in the classroom.

Reaching an understanding of the technologies, and being transparent in the teaching of them empowers the instructor to then apply social constructionist theory and pedagogy as she plans her assignments (that implement the technologies) to ensure that they are helping to meet course goals. An example mentioned earlier was the intentional use of *PowerPoint* to create a topic outline for a research paper. For this assignment, students will be held accountable to explain what questions they will answer within the chosen topic, and will need to complete research, organize facts, and consider their audience, while also anticipating the audience's questions or concerns. Another example is the *Blackboard* current event discussion referred to in chapter three. These discussion postings are conversations and debates that teach the students not only something new about their current event, but also about broadening their knowledge by learning through the responses from their peer community.

For students to form a deep understanding of their own learning, teachers must be transparent and intentional. These two strategies are imperative to successfully implement *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* into a composition classroom, and especially a classroom that has never experienced either of these technologies as learning or writing tools. If students do not understand why they are completing assignments, such as the online peer review, then the theory behind the creation of these assignments goes to

waste and the students might view the activities as games rather than as learning tools. The process of teaching these technologies through social constructionist theory is not a covert operation in the classroom, but should be an open discussion.

By constructing new knowledge through writing as process, collaborative learning, peer review, and writing as a learning tool, students become members of several communities. Students first become part of the community of learners at their institution, and members of the discourse community for each course they attend. As students develop critical thinking skills and become passionate about new experiences and learning, they become members of learning communities of their choice, whether it is the student government, a weekly book club, volunteering their time for a worthy cause, or joining a jazz ensemble. Through writing and reflecting on their experiences, the broadening of knowledge is cyclical; the more a student participates in the knowledge community, the more he or she will learn, and the more that student will impart to his or her community of learners.

Successful learning in a social constructionist classroom does not come directly from the instructor, though it is the responsibility of the instructor to facilitate that learning, but from a variety of collaborative activities in the classroom. Students learn from other students by hearing voices in the classroom, and it has been proven that those voices can also be heard through the use of *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard*. Both technologies are readily available and competent tools that will help create a responsible balance between traditional and technological coursework in the first-year composition classroom. It is time to take responsibility for the teaching of these technologies, and time to stop assuming that *PowerPoint* and *Blackboard* are thoughtfully instructed in other

classrooms. I call for instructors to become learners and to meet students “where they are” by implementing technology in the composition classroom through the lens of social constructionist theory.

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