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"With Tension comes a little work": Safety and Privacy in the Online Classroom Space

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Blogs and wikis have long been applauded for affording interactivity and collaboration, found to abet student motivation and engagement. However, no research has yet examined issues of student safety and privacy resulting from using technologies. Presenting a qualitative research study of three writing classes who used Google Drive to share their writings, this study seeks to understand student attitudes toward safety and privacy when using wiki-like technologies technologies in an institutional learning environment. The data were collected using a questionnaire and focus groups. Although the study anticipated that the technology would adversely affect some students' learning, students reported that the tension resulting from increased transparency contributed to increased motivation, even among those highly uncomfortable sharing online. The study adds to the existing literature on digital literacy by pointing out the roots of student motivation when using wiki-like platforms and suggests a possible pedagogical pitfall of online classroom technologies.

Keywords: writing, wikis, safety, privacy, online.

Safety and Motivation in the Online Classroom Space

As the Internet enables the sharing of student works in the virtual classroom environment, blogs and wikis have been lauded for the interactivity and collaboration they afford. Proponents of these tools maintain this collaboration "promote[s] deeper and more engaging learning within socially rich and collaborative online environments" (Wheeler, 2010). By activating the social aspects in institutional learning environments, in other words, educators can enliven the classroom. Digital literacies scholarship has emphasized the benefits resulting from increased motivation (Mills, 2010; Vetter, 2014), a wider audience (Lammers, 2012), and an emphasis on process over the final product (Barton, 2005). By allowing students to collaborate to create a public work, students learn to negotiate with one another and reflect deeply on what goes into quality composition (Lundin, 2008; National Institute for Literacy, 2006; Vetter, 2014).

As Web 2.0 platforms such as Google Drive become more ubiquitous and allow students to share their works not only with instructors but with the world and their class, however, instructors need to investigate both the positive and the potentially negative impacts of these semi-public domains. In some ways, posting and publishing online is just another form of classroom sharing and teacher commentary and the same rules of decorum apply. However, online platforms such as Google Drive allow this discourse to be captured and preserved in the moment so that it lingers well past the moment of presentation or discussion.

To date, however, no research has examined student safety or privacy concerns that may result among some students who use these transparent technologies. Are there some students who feel threatened by the lack of privacy in these open spaces and who shut down as a result of such technologies? If so, which students are hurt by the openness of these technologies? In short, do the safety and privacy issues raised by wiki-like spaces shut down student learning, and, if so, what can be done to address these issues?

According to the rhetoric of safe spaces, students need to feel safe in order to learn (Stengel, 2010); adolescents need psychologically safe environments to engage, take risks, learn and grow (Boostrom, 1998). However ubiquitous, this idea is largely metaphoric (Boostrom, 1998), born out of discussions

on multicultural education (Holley, 2005). In fact, many educators from Plato to Dewey patently reject the idea, arguing that students need to feel *un*comfortable for learning to occur (Boostrom, 1998; Stob, 2013). Some have critiqued whether it's even possible to create a safe space (Boostrom, 1998; Holley, 2005; Stengel, 2010). Being safe, others argue, can result in a nonacademic classroom environment that stifles student learning. Nevertheless, studies of student perceptions of classroom safety confirm that safe classroom environments are important to students (Holley, 2005; Raes, 2015) suggesting some truth to the maxim.

Discussion of online safety, particularly in online peer review, has centered around the issue of anonymity. Because students experience more stress when publicly evaluating peers (Pope, 2005), anonymity supported more accurate peer assessments (Raes, 2015) and mitigated evaluative apprehension (Yu, 2009). Students opened up more online with concealed identities, studies found. Some of these studies, however, take up the rhetoric of safe spaces without acknowledging these assumptions.

In this paper, I define "safety" as a feeling of comfort as defined by the students in the study. The converse lack of safety would equal student "discomfort" or, according to the verbiage of the questionnaire, a feeling of being "uncomfortable" "a little" or "a lot". Students who are uncomfortable using the technology might shut down academically in response to the technology but, as we will see, students could also feel uncomfortable without shutting down academically. The definition of safety, for the purposes of this study, is then related to the students' own definitions of "comfort" or "discomfort".

The concern with "privacy" overlaps with the discussion on safety as the technology being discussed here, I conjecture, creates a lack of safety resulting from the reduced privacy. Because students have access to one another's writings and because students are being asked to offer constructive criticism publicly, the privacy of the traditional writing class gives way to transparency and openness in the public online classroom, which reduces student privacy.

This study presents a qualitative research study of three writing classes who used Google Drive to increase interactivity in sharing and workshopping their works online. The class was characterized by a remarkable degree of transparency with students accessing and commenting on one another's writings both in and out of class. Despite the potential for high levels of discomfort and a lack of safety, in focus groups and questionnaires, many students commented that they felt comfortable sharing their work online. And the study found that, contrary to popular belief, some discomfort led to higher levels of motivation. Although the 33 participants make it statistically significant, for the purposes of this study, the findings remain primarily qualitative with the focus on general level of comfort and reasons for the perceived safety or lack thereof.

This workshop model is grounded in the work of composition theorist Peter Elbow who encouraged teaching writing in a manner that encourages teachers to facilitate learning by forcing students to become authorities. Drawing upon students' inherent ability to discern what makes good or bad writing, instructors following Elbow's model allow students to share their works thereby exposing students to both good and bad writing which allow them to discern for themselves the subtleties in both. Rather than reading only published examples of composition, far outside the capabilities of the beginning writing student, reading peer works gives students exposure to realistic peer models (Elbow, 1968).

Followers of Elbow place an emphasis on the revision process rather than the finished product, a feature workshop classes share with the wiki-based class. As others have pointed out, wikis serve as a tool that complements the workshop model of teaching by emphasizing collaboration and revision over the final product (Barton, 2005). The wiki-space, where multiple users contributed and help create a work, "exemplifies many of the tenets of composition that the field purports to value" including collaboration and emphasis on continual revision and communal knowledge formation (cited in Lundin, 2008). In short, wikis and wiki-like tools such as Google Drive provide a tool that complements the workshop model of teaching writing.

Although the pedagogical strategy employed is the workshop model, this paper seeks a greater understanding of online technologies. That is, although the workshop model is the catalyst for this sharing, the tool allowing this increased transparency and interactivity, examined here, is the wiki-like space, Google Drive. While the findings of this paper might be found useful to composition theorists,

the study seeks to understand the effects of the increased transparency and interactivity resulting from the online tool and builds primarily on the existing literature on digital technologies.

Classroom Procedure

Over the past two and a half years I've used Google Drive as a homework hand-in tool and peer review in my undergraduate freshman composition course.
In Google Drive, I created assignment drop boxes where students drop in their works in progress. In this set-up, all members of the class can view and comment on one another's works and comments left by both the instructor and students are visible until students click to "resolve" at which time, the comment becomes invisible but is retained in the Revision History. Tagged by their school username, often a permutation of their first and/or last name, students are sometimes identifiable but not always.

The course was characterized by a high degree of transparency. Students were asked to complete all pre-writing, rough draft, and final essay assignments for the four essay assignments using Google Drive. In addition, each student had their essays read and workshopped by the entire class, and all students shared and received peer feedback in small groups for each assignment.

All throughout the outlining, prewriting, and drafting process, I viewed and commented on student essays using Google Drive alongside their peers providing commentary on all rough drafts once and another round of comments after the final draft was due.

Classroom Protocol

To foreground the potential discomfort of the peer review process, in the first week of class, we read Dave Eggers' rant on "Saying Yes" and a *New York Times* response entitled "Not Everyone Gets or Deserves a Gold Star," later changed to "A Critic's Case for Critics Who are Actually Critics" (2012). In his rant, Eggers takes issue with kneejerk critics and encourages young people to withhold their judgment until they themselves have attempted to create that art. Rather, he encourages everyone to "Say yes" in work and in life. *The New York Times* response, written by a professional critic, cautions against Eggers enthusiasm and defends the role of critics, arguing that a dearth of honest criticism could lead to mediocrity.

In the first week of class, we discussed the points brought up by each writer and students were asked to reflect on the merits of each. In most discussions, I closed by encouraging students to be sensitive in giving feedback but strong in accepting suggestions. The attributes of good writing, as indicated on the class rubric (See Appendix), were referenced throughout the class.

As much as possible, I tried to couch my online comments in neutral terms or questions. For example to give students guidance on revising their rough drafts, I wrote: "Watch for fragment sentences such as this one.", "Right word?", "?", "Topic sent?", "Example?", "Can you quantify this to show the severity of the problem?", or "How does this support your thesis?"

At the end of each rough draft, I also left a longer terminal comment itemizing my main concern(s). One such terminal comment on the Cause/Effect essay read: "____, You may not have enough space in 4-5 pages to go into both the causes *and effects. I think your causes are very compelling but if you are more interested in the effects, you may want to focus on that instead. In any case, choose one. You need to now gather your evidence to back all this up. The crisis in _____ is huge and the ramifications are also great."

The protocol for giving comments were modeled through two all-class workshops. On these workshop days, students read and commented on student works together as a class. Students were prompted by me with specific questions and asked to point out favorite parts and any possible weaknesses in the essay.

For example, in the peer review for the Textual Analysis, students were asked:

1. Does the essay communicate the main idea of the article being analyzed?
2. Does the essay communicate the author's position with regard to the article being analyzed?
3.

For the final Problem/Solution essay, students were prompted to ask the following questions:

1. Does the essay persuade you that the problem is indeed a problem?
2. Does the essay identify the causes?
3. Does the essay persuade you that the solution proposed is the best solution? Why or why not?
4.

The prompts, in other words, aligned with the purpose of the assignment and served as a reminder of the criteria for each assignment.

Beyond these prompts, no further protocol was offered regarding online behavior.

Method

Participants

This study captures the experiences of 56 University of Hawaii students enrolled in my English 100 (Composition I) and English 190 (Composition I for Transfer Students) during the Fall of 2014. Varying in age from 18 to fifty-something, but primarily composed of recent high school graduates, the classes were mixed in gender and ethnicity. Of all three classes, 45% were male and 55% were female. Reflecting the ethnic make-up of Hawaii, the classes were predominately Asian with 52% Asian, 32% Caucasian, 6% Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic, and 4% of some mixed race, and 2% unknown.

The members of the class also hailed from different places. Although the majority (52%) came from Oahu, a significant percentage (36%) came from the mainland, with a few (7%) coming from international destinations including Korea, Sweden, and Samoa and 4% from a neighbor island.

This study uses two qualitative research methods to gather data on the use of Google Drive as a homework hand-in and peer review tool: 1. A *questionnaire* given to students in the last week of class gathered student responses to sharing and commenting online. 2. A *focus group* comprised of select students captured further thoughts on privacy.

Participant Researcher

As a participant researcher, I served as the sole instructor of the three courses and met with each of the classes three times a week. In class, in conferences, and through the essays they wrote for the class, I got to know the students personally. Through their essay topics, students gave me insight into their personal history, their hobbies, career goals, and general interests in life. For example, one reigning Miss Teen Hawaii wrote about beauty pageants, gamers wrote about the cognitive benefits of playing videogames, and a student from Arizona wrote about the violence along the Arizona/Mexico border.

As a participant researcher, my role introduced issues of validity into the data gathering process. Knowing me, some students in both the focus groups and on the questionnaire may have been inclined to share only their positive comments on Google Drive. Students might have said what they thought I wanted to hear.

At the same time, as both researcher and instructor, I also contributed to a sense of safety and familiarity for the students. And the focus groups and questionnaires, to a certain extent, served as a space for personal reflection on the semester and the class. My role as participant researcher introduced the potential for bias but also maintained a level of comfort that may have helped some students open up.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire, which was designed to gather student attitudes toward privacy in the online peer review process, was handed out on the last day of school along with teacher evaluations.

The questionnaire included questions on four main aspects of their technology use:

1. Did they feel comfortable or uncomfortable sharing their work, giving comments, receiving comments from peers, and receiving comments from their instructor online?
2. Did sharing works on Google Drive motivate them to write better or revise?

3. Did they use Google Drive to view other student works online?

There was no incentive to take the questionnaire, and 33 students (or 59% of students invited to participate) completed it. Of these, the results might be found to be biased as students self-selected whether or not they wanted to participate; students who had a negative experience may have declined the questionnaire. On the other hand, students who had a negative experience with Google Drive may have also taken the opportunity to express their negative opinions anonymously.

Following the collection of the questionnaires, individual student questionnaires were placed in groups based on their relative comfort: those who said they felt

1. totally comfortable
2. totally uncomfortable
3. little to no discomfort
4. uncomfortable "a little" and "a lot"

Although the results of the questionnaire were found to fall along a negatively skewed bell curve worthy of further examination, for the purposes of this study, analysis of the questionnaire remains mainly qualitative with an interest in general trends (did students overall feel comfortable or uncomfortable?) and the individual relationships between comfort and motivation.

Focus Group

On the last day of class, students were also invited to participate in a focus group. Focus group participants were selected to capture a mix of genders, ethnicities, and places of origin but to a certain extent were random and in the end based also on convenience to the focus group meeting place. In exchange for participating in the focus group, students were offered a free bagel and coffee along with a $5 Starbuck gift card. Eighteen out of the 56 students participated in the focus groups.

Because I best understood the questions and follow-up questions, I served as the moderator. No additional researchers were present during this discussion. The focus group discussion was audio recorded, and all respondents were at least 18 at the time of the study. The questions posed to the focus group were as follows:

1. Do you feel comfortable sharing your writing on Google Drive with your classmates?
    a. What about posting comments?
    b. What about having classmates view your comments?
    c. What about having others see your instructor's comments?
2. We give up a little bit of our privacy when we engage in any peer review. Do you feel using Google Drive changes the peer review process at all?
3. Does sharing your work on Google Drive motivate you?
4. Does sharing your work on Google Drive sometimes discourage you?
5. Do you feel like you're giving honest feedback on Google Drive?
6. Do you feel like you're writing for your peers or for your teacher?
7. What is the most uncomfortable aspect of using Google Drive?
8. Is there anything about using Google Drive that threatens your privacy?
9. Do you view the class as a safe space? What helped create a sense of a safe space? OR What made the class seem not safe?

In analyzing the comments made in focus groups, I was particularly sensitive to comments regarding comfort and its relationship to motivation. I compiled the outstanding students comments, and grouped these according to themes that emerged, for example, the theme that everyone felt they were "in the same boat" and theme that increased tension led to more and/or better work. This study reports the major themes that emerged in this case study.

Results

The questionnaire found that most students felt comfortable sharing and receiving comments on Google Drive, with a third (13/33) "Slightly Uncomfortable" in either sharing or receiving comments online with one notably "Totally Uncomfortable" receiving comments particularly from the instructor.

Eighty-five (85%) of students said Google Drive motivated them to write better or revise either "a little" or "a lot". Of these, most (36%) were encouraged to both revise and write better just "a little" with another 27% encouraged to revise "a lot" and write better "a little", and a still significant 21% encouraged to revise and write better "a lot". In short, the vast majority of respondents said they felt Google Drive encouraged them to revise and/or write better to some degree.

In focus groups, students commented that the comment bubbles that appeared encouraged this revision. "I wanted it resolved," Lauren said. Lisa, in another class, explained that clicking "Resolve" was satisfying: "I fixed that. Check," she explained. Although the comments were still shared in the document's revision history, the fact of eliminating the comment allowed students to visually clean up their document, a satisfying feeling, some reported.

Only 15% of the 33 respondents commented that using Google Drive did not encourage revision or better writing "at all". These findings confirm the work of digital literacy theorists that sharing works online can enhance motivation.

There is some evidence to suggest that slight discomfort led to higher levels of motivation. Of those who responded that they were motivated "a lot", 4/7 responded they were "Slightly Uncomfortable" with either sharing or receiving comments online. This suggests a correlation between discomfort and motivation.

Meanwhile 5/12 (41.6%) of those who said they were motivated to revise or write better "a little" reported feeling some discomfort with either posting their work or receiving comments online. Their level of discomfort notably exceeded that of those motivated "a lot", indicating that greater discomfort was not directly proportional with greater motivation. Still, the fact that these respondents were motivated "a little" draws a link between some discomfort and motivation.

In contrast, those who were not motivated "at all" replied they were "Totally Comfortable" or a combination of "Totally Comfortable"/"Comfortable" sharing works on Google Drive. A high degree of comfort was correlated with no motivation, a finding that was further substantiated in focus groups.

Focus group participants in all three groups indicated that a certain level of discomfort motivated them. "I felt uncomfortable sharing my personal essay," Miranda in Focus Group 2 said adding, "[but] I think it motivated me to write better." Knowing that they would be sharing their work prompted some students to try harder: "You might want to up your writing a little bit," Lisa, in the same class, said. "It's a peer pressure thing," said Juan in Focus Group 3. "You want to show your best work." Others readily agreed: "You don't want to embarrass yourself," Sarah in the same Focus Group said.
Taylor who had particular success with his Cause/Effect essay said that knowing his essay would be workshopped by the whole class, he worked on the essay all week. "With tension comes a little work," he said. Cade, in Focus Group 1, said similarly he was nervous about sharing his personal essay about coming out to his family. "The nerves still got to me," he said. But by the end class, he said, it was the essay he was most proud of. In short, having the potential pressure of their peer judgment motivated some to work harder on their essays. Although this nervousness was sometimes accompanied by negative feelings, for the participants interviewed, a little bit of nervousness was accompanied by some achievement.

"We were all in the same boat."

Students in multiple focus groups commented that the fact that everyone had to share their work online contributed to a sense of safety. "We were all in the same boat," Lauren in Focus Group 3 said. "You were being equal," one student in Focus Group 1 commented. Cade agreed. "It's equal," he said. In Focus Group 3, Juan, who said he felt comfortable sharing his work on Google Drive, explained his sense of comfort: "Everyone has to do it. It's not that big a deal." Over and over, when asked why they felt comfortable, students in different focus groups cited the fact that everyone had to share their works online.

A feeling that everyone would eventually have their work judged created a built-in sense of decorum. "Everyone had to be civil," Sarah in Focus Group 3 said. "What comes around goes around," said Juan,

reversing the cliché "What goes around comes around" to suggest that individuals put out what they themselves get. "You mean what goes around comes around?" another student corrected. "No, I mean what comes around goes around," Juan said. Juan was playing with the idea that everyone would have their work viewed and judged by the class echoing the idea that everyone was "in the same boat".

Sharing in itself created a sense of safety. Because all class members had to post their works online and participate in the workshopping and peer review process, students said it helped to level the playing field and helped them overcome their uneasiness.

"I'd work more in a new group."

Conversely, some focus group participants said too much comfort in peer review groups led to a lack of productivity in the in-class peer review sessions, students said. "When you get used to who you're with," the writing suffers, Brian in Focus Group 3 said. "When we know each other," Lauren, in the same group, said, it's easier to just say, "Nah, let's not do anything."

"I'd work more in a new group, [because] I don't want to be a douche," Brian said. Having a new group added a level of formality that motivated Brian and Lauren to work whereas the familiarity of a peer review group he'd grown comfortable with allowed them to be a little lazy. Jocelyn who often posted detailed, nuanced comments even often offering suggestions, said she sometimes posted her comments at home rather than working in class. Together, these comments suggested that too much comfort with a peer group actually led to a lack of structure, which led to inhibited productivity and progress.

Still, others were quick to jump in and disagree. "I wouldn't say that," Lisa in Focus Group 2 said. "If you switch groups, you feel more uncomfortable" but "there is no difference in writing," Shannon said. For some, working in a group that was comfortable made no difference in terms of their productivity in class. For a significant number of students, however, it was a factor, and just as a certain level of discomfort was correlated with increased levels of motivation so excess comfort led to lower achievement for some.

The fact that many in Focus Group 3 commented on this problem suggests that the issue of comfort may have been an issue particularly in that class. Students in Focus Group 2 reported it to be less of an issue in their class and the issue did not come up in Focus Group 1.

Discussion

It should be noted that in both the focus groups and on the questionnaires, students said they were afraid of the judgment of their peers over the judgment of the instructor. Almost all students on the questionnaire commented that they were concerned more with what their peers thought than what their instructor thought. And even the respondent who commented he felt "Totally uncomfortable" having instructor's comments visible, when asked why, responded, "Other students could see my work" and "Other students could see my instructor's comments." Remarkably, most students said they felt comfortable with the instructor posting their comments.

Validity/Reliability

The study did not capture those students who dropped out of the course and who may have been adversely affected by the transparency of sharing on Google Drive. This study reflects only the reflections of those students who were able to complete the course and who felt inclined to share their thoughts. As such, there is a possibility that the results are skewed to reflect students who had a positive experience.

That said, both the questionnaire and focus groups, and particularly the focus groups, did capture the concerns of students who said they were at times uncomfortable sharing their work online. Five out of the 18 students interviewed (or 27%) admitted to feeling uncomfortable at least part of the time. This percentage aligns with the percentage captured in the questionnaire which found that 33% of respondents felt at least "slightly uncomfortable" with sharing work or receiving comments online.

Another indication that students were sharing their honest thoughts, some students used the focus group as a forum to voice their concerns. In Focus Group 1, Skylar, commented almost immediately that "It was too much freedom," referring to the ability for other student's to edit their work. And when asked

if there were any closing comments, Juan in Focus Group 3, made sure to interject that Google Drive is not useful when there are problems with Internet access, a problem he encountered one weekend.

Conclusion

Pushing back against the optimism of many digital literacy theorists, this study explored possible breeches in safety and privacy that can sometimes occur with digital technologies. Although some discomfort was identified, ultimately the experience of these three classes, as reflected in their questionnaires and focus groups, suggest that some discomfort actually contributed to higher levels of motivation and achievement. This study confirms the findings of previous digital literacy theorists who found that wiki-like spaces promote motivation through engagement with a wider audience (Mills, 2010; Vetter, 2014; Lammers, 2012). This study sheds light on the roots of this motivation and also suggests a possible pitfall of transparent digital online spaces.

Although this study includes some discussion on why students said they felt safe, more work could be done on what contributes to a sense of safety in public online spaces, particularly in the institutional online space.

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