

2008

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Recommended Citation

Hum, Sue (2008) "The Persuasiveness of Pleasure: Play, Reciprocity, and Persuasion in Online Discussions," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 14 , Article 9.
<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl14bje4>
Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol14/iss1/9>

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The Persuasiveness of Pleasure: Play, Reciprocity, and Persuasion in Online Discussions

Cover Page Footnote

Sue Hum is Associate Professor of English, specializing in rhetoric and composition, at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in writing. Her most recent works include *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers* (co-edited with Peter Vandenberg and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, NCTE, 2006) and *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Speaking: The Integration of Rhetoric and Vision in Constructing the Real* (co-edited with Kristie S. Fleckenstein and Linda T. Calendrillo, Parlor, 2007).

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Sue Hum

John begins his online discussion board post on the differences between speech and writing with:¹ “Writing is uh, well, more fluid than speech, you know, you don’t have the same, uh, disfluencies, that um—you do while talking. Writing also gives you the chance to pontificate by showcasing archaic nomenclatures and constructions that would get you slapped in everyday conversational use.”² John’s opening sentence both describes and performs the differences between speech and writing and, by so doing, persuades more effectively. In creative writing parlance, he shows rather than tells, deriving pleasure from both his performance and his expectation of interaction on an online stage. John’s opener above demonstrates how some students transform online academic spaces by resisting the traditional expository mode of academic discourse shaped within a print medium and by deploying rhetorical strategies that take advantage of the interactive, reciprocal medium of an online environment.

Many students, like John, derive enjoyment not only from their own literacy performances but also from the expectation that their performances will be read, acknowledged, answered, and sometimes resisted by others. John’s playful opener employs an approach many students consider a more effective invitation to dialogue than the simple thesis-driven, referential statement that is characteristic of expository writing. John’s humorous performance might yield authorial pleasure not only in the act of composing a clever post but especially in attracting classmates’ responses, including praise.³ Jane compliments John: “I admire your be-

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¹ A student enrolled in Theory and Practice of Composition, a writing intensive upper division course populated by English Education, Professional Writing, and Communications majors, John (and others) was participating in online discussion of the assigned reading, in response to specific instructor-assigned prompts. This prompt which yielded the quoted responses asked students to reflect on one difference between speaking and writing and to discuss which one they find more powerful. Online discussion board “chats” constituted 20 percent of a student’s grade and their performance was evaluated on the quality, quantity, and promptness of their participation.

² All students’ names are pseudonyms.

³ Play involves cultural presuppositions, ranging between Derrida’s *différance* which defers meaning and closure and Bakhtin’s *carnival* which revolts against conventional and institutional norms. Its definition is contextually and temporally specific.

ginning sentence. It is a perfect attention grabber. It creatively makes your point that writing offers more opportunities to be polished and wordsmithed.” Katherine concurs: “I agree with Jane. You opening sentences certainly are attention grabbing. What fabulous diction. I need a dictionary. You proved your point that the written word is powerful.”⁴ Jane’s and Katherine’s approval are two in a series of responses that highlight not only the interactivity of online discussion but also the reciprocity that yields pleasure for authors and readers. This pleasure of reciprocity—where users attend to each other responsively—explains partly why online social networking among teens and tweeners has burgeoned on MySpace, Facebook, and other sites.⁵

The sheer pleasure inspired by online discussions is an under-explored but important phenomenon. Pleasure derived from verbal play possesses considerable pedagogical implications both for immediate classroom engagement and for rhetorical persuasion in academic discourse. Through play, students and teachers open themselves to multiple modes of thinking and ways of living, both of which invite new insights into persuasion that are downplayed by traditional academic approaches to analog argumentation. For instance, James Baumlin argues that persuasion becomes possible through play because play opens up alternative modes, ways, and worlds to the imagination of writers and readers. By prohibiting stability and closure, play opens up the possibility of persuasion: “Actual persuasion occurs not through combat with an audience but through collaboration (though collusion, foregrounding *lusus* or play, is perhaps the more accurate term)” (37). Imaginative play is the lubricant that creates the “realm of potentiality, and therefore of uncertainty” (38), a first step to achieving understanding, predicated on imagining “freely another’s experience” and acknowledging “its validity and truth and goodness” (39). Imaginative play not only fosters doubt but also nurtures the construction of alternative worlds, allowing for the imaginative transport out of a mode of thinking or a way of living: “Play creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (Huizinga, qtd. in Baumlin 39). A second step, then, is to rely on imaginative play for exploring alternatives, taking risks, and experimenting beyond the conventional: “the extent to which discourse invites such imaginative participation and mixing of worlds will determine its success or failure as persuasion” (41). Play both undermines closure and encourages experimentation. To take pleasure in any (inter)play is to engage speculatively and generatively in multiplicity.

⁴ Students’ online texts have been reproduced “as is,” with the original format, style and spelling; typos are not indicated in the article with “sic.”

⁵ I use *reciprocity* instead of *interactivity* to emphasize the give-and-take relationship among writers and readers in asynchronous online discussions. For a discussion of different kinds of interactivity see Gurak, who describes five features of online interactivity: access to the inner circle, the capacity to talk back, a two-way presence online, ecommerce connections, and privacy (44-46). Warnick outlines three perspectives of interactivity: features-based interactivity, which focuses on the function of a medium, i.e., hyperlinking and feedback forms (see RateMyProfessor.com); user-to-user interaction, which prioritizes message sequencing, i.e., email, chats and discussion boards; and artifactual interactivity, which examines how users process, experience, and perceive online communication (70-71). Estimates indicate that 80 percent of participants in social networking range between the ages of 15 and 21 years (Bernoff).

The fusion of pleasure and play in the writing process and product enlarges students' rhetorical repertoires for enacting persuasion. Asynchronous online discussions have enabled students to read, write, and learn with each other in dynamic and reciprocal ways. Thus, the more teachers can understand and exploit the characteristic of pleasurable reciprocity intrinsic to online discussion—and the potential for the dynamic of pleasure intrinsic to that reciprocity—the more fully we can understand, support, and even cultivate various modes of persuasion. This essay explores the role of pleasure in facilitating diverse modes of rhetorical participation in online discussion. I analyze three examples of how fusing pleasure and persuasion lays the groundwork for audience participation, focusing on students' playful rhetorical strategies that encourage resistance and provide alternative strategies to expository discourse. I conclude by highlighting online persuasion not as linear, thesis-driven, goal-directed exposition, but as unpredictable, pleasurable play.⁶ I propose that teachers and students cultivate four attitudinal emphases—adaptability, curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking—to nurture the potential for pleasure through play in persuasion and to broaden our notions of rhetorical persuasion.

Playful, Pleasurable Persuasion

Composition teachers tend to approach persuasion by foregrounding the author's ability to effect change in an audience—whether it is through rational deliberation (Aristotle), identification (Burke), common ground (Rogers; Spellmeyer), or claims and warrants (Toulmin).⁷ Most accounts of persuasive strategies neglect the dynamic of pleasure, a subset of affect, defined as a collection of emotions, attitudes, and moods that are aligned less with the cognitive, rational, judging aspects of writing and more with the pathos-centered creativity.⁸ John's opener accentuates how rhetors or orators historically generated “pleasure in the audience, first by making sure that it emanated from themselves during their own rhetorical performances . . . then spread [it] contagiously to the audience” (Johnson 2). In *Notes on the Heart*, Susan McLeod argues that affect, or the noncognitive aspects of mental activity, plays a large role in writing and learning to write. Her position echoes other calls to attend to the role of emotions in the writing process and in writing relationships (Bloom; Brand; Fleckenstein; Perl; Tobin). Despite the suspicion and marginalization of affect, Kia Jane Rich-

⁶For a discussion of the lack of fun in the discipline's descriptions of the writing process and the importance of enjoyment, see Runciman. Elbow describes the limitations of academic discourse and its role in ignoring pleasure (136).

⁷Approaches to persuasion in pedagogy concentrate on the power of the author to motivate and move an audience. For example, teachers emphasize how authors might utilize Aristotle's three proofs or *pisteis*: through argument and reason or *logos*, the character of the speaker or *ethos*, and the disposition of the hearer or *pathos* (see Carey; Aristotle). An aesthetic approach to persuasion, or a better understanding of the dynamic linking pleasure and persuasion, can be located in Gorgias's definition of *peitho*, or the process of persuasion as the “art of awakening emotions” (Segal 108).

⁸The word *pleasure* encompasses a range of feelings and intensities, whether in positive forms such as ecstasy or bliss or in negative forms such as horror and revulsion; see Mission and Morgan chapter 8.

mond argues that “[e]motions are a vital component of the social fabric that we create through conversations and nonverbal exchanges in and out of the classroom” (6). Because online persuasion manifests through a reciprocal dialogue between writer and reader, composition teachers who seek to reignite pleasure in rhetorical persuasion can take lessons from students’ online discussions, examining the moments when pleasure and persuasion fuse, when pleasure fails to evolve, and when pleasure does evolve but persuasion does not follow. Because not all pleasure is persuasive nor is all persuasion pleasurable, I argue that playful, pleasurable persuasion in online discussions entails three separate, interrelated, and reciprocal processes: performance, negotiation, and recognition.

An act of persuasion in online discussions is not a universal but a contextualized, instantiated, reciprocal activity. To persuade and be persuaded, to please and be pleased, both writer and reader must interact reciprocally.⁹ First, online persuasion begins with the performance of persuading, where the writer takes on the identity of the author and acts accordingly in coordination with the reader who takes on the identity and actions of an audience. If neither writer nor reader undertakes those identities and actions, then the act of persuasion cannot come into fruition. Second, author and audience negotiate with each other on the acceptability of each other’s roles and purposes in a continual, provisional, context-specific practice of give-and-take. Then, both author and audience must negotiate persuasion into existence. The act and action of persuasion—a reciprocal act—requires the collaboration of both parties, working in concert. Third, writer and reader recognize and are recognized by each other so that roles and action involve the participation and transaction of a community. According to sociolinguist James Paul Gee, “to be a particular who [writer or reader] and to pull off a particular what [persuasion] requires that we act, value, interact, and use language in sync with or in coordination with other people and with various objects (‘props’) in appropriate locations and at appropriate times” (*Situated* 23). In short, the work of performance, negotiation, and recognition involves the process and product of coordination between the author and the audience. Even then, pleasurable persuasion in online discussions may not follow, as is the case in two of the three examples discussed below, thus highlighting the unpredictable, time-specific, context-determined nature of playful, pleasurable persuasion.

Author-Centered Pleasure

Some online performances, although pleasurable for the author, do not result in persuasion. Pleasure sputters and dies if an audience does not contribute to, negotiate with, and recognize its performance and if kairos, or the appropriateness of time and place, is not taken into consideration. The example below demonstrates author-centered pleasure, which is characterized by the lack of reciprocity between author and audience. Bryan, whose self-identified online persona is the “Mad Monk,” makes a jocular, witty reply to another student’s discussion board post which uses profanity as an illustration of different conversation

⁹This essay limits its scope to persuasion in online, asynchronous discussions. Although persuasion does not require pleasure, and persuasion does indeed occur without pleasure, I argue that pleasure extends a more effective invitation to dialogue; pleasure serves as a lubricant for a better relationship between author and audience. See Gee *Introduction* for a discussion of kinship (24).

rituals among various discourse communities:¹⁰

When someone brings up profanity, I feel like a little kid in a candy store. I am extremely fond of profanity, and profanity is fond of me. However, this helpful and joyous element of my speech cannot be transferred to my writing because it is socially unacceptable. That is to say, in the discourse communities of academia and the workplace, profanity does not fit the mood or the objective. Actually, a funny part of profanity is that it is self replicating. Because, if I did use profanity in my academic writings, I'm sure the professor would have some profanities waiting for me. Or not. Perhaps they have more to lose by making the mistake of using profanity in the academic world. See? Profanity makes the world turn.

Bryan's post, one of six that discuss conversation rituals, does not receive a direct response. Although two other responses tackled the issue of profanity and were posted after his, neither addressed Bryan, his point, and/or his playful (ir)reverence for profanity. In addition to his use of chiasmus and personification—"I am extremely fond of profanity, and profanity is fond of me"—Bryan jokes about the social unacceptability of its use in professional contexts, imagining the repercussions for professors who respond to his use of profanity with profanity. Such subversive playfulness is the source of authorial pleasure, as acknowledged in his end-of-the-semester online feedback: "I actually had a great time with these chats . . . I would also like to thank myself for being so clever throughout the semester in my electronic chats. I couldn't have done it without me." The author-centered nature of his stance, situated within a personal framework, highlights the lack of responsive reciprocity from his audience. His classmates' lack of response to his ideas or his wit, their lack of contribution and recognition of Bryan's performance limits it as simply that: a performance and a display, an author-centered pleasure, one that does not yield an interaction, let alone persuasion.¹¹ The dissonance Bryan highlights in his ludic performance remains unrecognized—and perhaps even unread—by his audience. Bryan's bid to create a subversive context fails without the participation—whether collusion or contestation—of an audience. Playful, pleasurable persuasion is a reciprocal, communal process and product.

Particularly crucial to the intersection of pleasure and persuasion are the intertwined processes of negotiation and recognition between the writer and reader. Not all participants derive pleasure from play, just as not all participants are persuaded through/by play. Depending on the audience's reception of a performance, joking and wordplay can backfire on an author, as Bryan acknowledges in his end-of-the-semester feedback:

¹⁰ Here, students are responding to an assigned prompt that asks them to consider how the concept of discourse communities provides a powerful tool for teaching and/or improving writing.

¹¹ Richard Weaver, in *Visions of Order*, argues that all language seeks to persuade: "We are all of us preachers in private and public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it, in our way" (69; see also *Language is Sermonic* 221-25).

Since I tend to always speak with extremely dry and cruel humor, my tone cannot express the fact that I am joking if you can't hear me speak. In summary, I have made many people very mad by simply joking around. In person, I don't necessarily please people all the time, but I definitely have a better chance of leaving the conversation at least mildly liked as opposed to hated.

In order for pleasure to facilitate persuasion and for persuasion to yield pleasure, the writer and reader must engage in a complex dance of performance, negotiation, and recognition. For pleasure to effect persuasion in online discussion, it cannot function as a top-down, linear phenomenon, in which the author acts on or even manipulates the audience. Instead, pleasurable persuasion requires the author and audience to act in concert.

Pleasure Fused with Persuasion

Playful, pleasurable persuasion begins with a generative performance that promotes the potential for multiple responses and productive mixing. This next example highlights how pleasure and persuasion fuse as a writer and reader cultivate openness, enter together into uncertainty, forge an understanding, and collaborate together to construct a concept with greater complexity and potentiality than either could generate alone. Struck by the phrase, "nakedness of language," Spencer and Meredith dialogue about the meaning of this intriguing visual-verbal metaphor. They begin by jointly creating a context for ludic investigation and pleasurable joint discovery. Spencer extrapolates from his personal experiences about email to a general statement about the state of computer mediated communication:¹²

I've always noticed that in e-mails, even between professors and students, the traditional rules of grammar, syntax, and punctuation, especially, are thrown out. Admittedly formal responses are sometimes warranted, but overall, most e-mail correspondence I participate in is largely informal, pragmatic, and sometimes symbol filled (i.e., ?). Literacy in this context intermingles with new signs and acquires a fluid structure that can be highly idiosyncratic. Signs created with punctuation tools from the keyboard can register universally, as in a smiley face, or as an inside joke. I won't go there. . . . The consequences are

¹² Spencer and Meredith were doctoral students in a graduate seminar on advanced composition theory. They were responding to the following instructor-assigned prompt: Student literacy and learning increasingly occurs in digital/electronic environments as more and more educational institutions embrace information and communication technologies as a way to deliver and mediate formal schooling, and as more and more teachers use networking technologies to host discussions in electronic spaces. With the increase of communication mediated by computer technology, educators must hypothesize about the nature, quality, and shape of language during what many consider as a technologically mediated revolution. Are our communication habits and rituals really so drastically changed with the advent of information and communication technologies? Share a story about your language use in an online setting (reading, "speaking," writing, image-ing). Use this story as a way to theorize about the relationship among technology, literacy, and learning.

interesting. Thinking of this hyperspace transformation as the modern day fall, in which we've picked the fruit of knowledge that we don't particularly understand, we've suddenly seen the *nakedness of our language*. It needs to be covered in symbols, informalities, and images. That this covering is largely restricted to hyperspace, or the computer screen, may suggest a larger transformation in the human psyche to accommodate the dichotomy between physical writing and literacy and literacy and writing that occurs in and through hyperspace. (emphasis added)

In this online discussion board post, Spencer blends the academic register with a conversational, "I won't go there," an aside that allows him to introduce a tantalizing tangent, the "insider joke," but not to discuss it in detail as would be expected in conventional, written exposition. Spencer's play, which Meredith recognizes as an invitation, leads to dialogue and negotiation. Both interlocutors must take on and then exchange the roles of writer and reader, persuader and persuadee, to create a context in which persuasion may occur.

Ideally, the reciprocity in an online discussion encourages writers to listen to, if not incorporate, readers' opinions, shifting their ideas to account for readers' responses, so that persuasion manifests through the interactions of writer and reader with a text. The persuasiveness of Spencer's post relies on its performative and aesthetic form of expression, the titillating tangent, the sexy analogy, and the humorous asides. Using Genesis as a metaphor for digital literacy, Spencer compares the limits of our understanding to the Edenic fall. That unrefined idea, clothed in the witty phrase, "nakedness of our language," ripe with intellectual and sensual incongruity, draws in Meredith, leading to a dialogue—and a negotiation—as they try to pin down the concept, its meanings, and possibilities.¹³ Even though such aesthetic, sometimes irrational, phrases are generally treated with disdain in conventional exposition, and may even be considered as noisy, chaotic, and tangential in academic discourse, they should not be discounted or ignored. Meredith recognizes the context and the invitation by offering her own definition, followed by examples of how published writers may be influenced by the medium:

What exactly do you mean when you say that we now see the nakedness of our language? . . . is it that we see the bareness of our language or that we recognize its essential parts and its elasticity? And then those essential parts translate into sounds or emotions we can't convey with the rapidity of spoken or physical language. Within this hyperspace we hold entire relationships, so we morph our written language to convey a physical presence. Like your suggestion of Marianne Moore and form, we play with the form to give it different meaning. What would e.e. cummings do with email . . . :)

By remaining open to the potentiality in Spencer's idea and metaphor, Meredith engages in intellectual play and exploratory risk-taking. Both interrogate and nuance the ideas of "nakedness of language," transforming persuasion

¹³ Schopenhauer's version of the Incongruity Theory of humor identifies play in the lack of fit between our abstract conceptions and our sensory experience, pleasure in the form of humor arising from a mismatch (Morreall 249).

from a one-sided or author-centered act to a collaborative affair, where understanding and meaning-making rely on reciprocal intellectual speculation. Meredith and Spencer make visible and recognize the roles, the act, and the action in a coordinated dance of whos and whats, persuader/persuadee and persuasion.

Just as persuasion occurs provisionally, continually, and sometimes even contentiously, pleasure manifests and is experienced in practice as a result of shared histories and ongoing dialogue. Both students participate in a similar academic discourse model that revels in theorizing in global and general terms, creating patterns out of specific phenomena. Their shared academic discourse model allows Spencer and Meredith to use accepted academic rules and procedures for “unpacking” the phrase, “nakedness of our language,” to develop what Gee calls, “situated meanings,” meanings that are “grounded in actual practices and experiences” (*Introduction* 51). Because both view the purpose of online discussion as exploration and inquiry, they share similar interactional goals. Just as Spencer finds in online discussions “an opportunity to enjoy seeing more dimensions to people’s thinking and writing style” (email), Meredith values dialogue: “As a student I will often probe my colleagues with ideas that I find complicated. This method really stimulates my own thinking, and I really enjoy hearing what my classmates have to say” (email). Their attempts at mutual understanding rest on the potential for persuasion: “in this state of sympathetic understanding we recognize both the multiplicity of world-views and our freedom to choose among them—either to retain our old or take a new” (Baumlin 36). Thus, their intellectual play melds “potential and hypothetical” (41). The fusion of pleasure and persuasion requires the reciprocal co-participation of Spencer and Meredith to create a context for that discovery, and negotiate actively to assemble meaning by using not an individualistic but a shared discourse model.

Pleasure Devoid of Persuasion

Not all pleasure results in persuasion, nor is all persuasion pleasurable. The third example below foregrounds pleasure that manifests in conflict and hurt feelings. Three graduate students in a seminar on advanced composition theory—Maya, David, and Dina—discuss the implications of a podium in the classroom, a conversation that results from assigned readings on theories of location.¹⁴ Disagreeing over the denotative and connotative meanings of a podium, Maya focuses on the functional advantages of using a podium within a high school, disagreeing with both David’s belief that a podium is an announcement and “safety zone” of teacherly authority and Dina’s feminist contention that the podium bolsters a young teacher’s control over the college classroom. Maya’s disagreement extends beyond the online discussions: into her high school classroom, a source of play and jokes for her and her students, and into the graduate seminar, a source of hurt feelings between her and another classmate. Here persuasion fails not because of the contested nature of their negotiation, but because of the limits of their recognition.¹⁵ In response to David’s in-class comment about the podium, Maya begins

¹⁴ Maya, David, and Dina responded to an instructor-assigned prompt that asked them to consider how space and place does or does not impinge upon their literacy, learning, and/or teaching.

¹⁵ Gee describes the concept of recognition as the work people engage in “to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing” (*Introduction* 29).

an online discussion about the relationship between space and pedagogy with an illustration:

As I admitted on Wednesday [in class], I never thought about the classroom and its contents as holding a gender. I would have scoffed the very idea of it. But after reading several articles that declare that classroom objects which are arranged in certain ways, do carry and agenda, and further carry a pedagogy, I am now a believer. I walked into my classroom with fresh eyes and was startled at what I saw. I have a very, here's a shocker, feminine classroom. My chairs and desks are facing one another and while I do (forgive me David) have a podium; my classroom definitely holds a feministic pedagogy. Why is that always a bad thing?

David and Dina see Maya's example of the podium as an invitation to dialogue further about the idea of space and place as active. Despite their epistemological differences, David and Dina negotiate gently and supportively. David responds by using humor to mediate their disparity in perspectives: "LOL. No hard feelings here Maya about the podium. I only mentioned it as a reflection over how I view space from a student's perspective." Next, he recounts a discussion with a professor who advocates reorganizing a classroom space to encourage eye contact and discussion among students as an expression of a non-traditional, student-centered pedagogy. David addresses Maya, concluding: "The podium for me is a barrier (a safety zone) of authority. In your setting, probably acceptable. In my setting, probably not." David couches his beliefs in a conciliatory ethos and language, making room for Maya's beliefs by acknowledging their contextual validity. Despite such care, Maya mis-recognizes David's response as a challenge and remains un-persuaded (see Maya's rejoinder below).

In addition, author-centered pleasure does not result in audience persuasion. Although Dina assumes a feminist affinity with Maya, that connection is unrecognized by Maya, and Dina inadvertently offends. Dina's descriptions of her pedagogy and experiences as a teacher below are interpreted by Maya as a confrontation:

David is right, Maya. Your setting requires you to "announce" your authority in the classroom. I don't think this is a bad thing though—it's simply necessary. As for your classroom being feminist, again, I think it's necessary, to a certain degree. I have noticed that students respond differently with male and female teachers, still. I have encountered this a little bit, so I've had to alter my personality (be more authoritative) to reestablish my authority in the class. I'm not saying this is your case, but I definitely think students try to get away with more with female teachers. As a result, we structure our classroom (physical space, vibe of the class, etc.) so we are able to "control" the dynamics of the class as much as we can without getting in the way of their learning. Besides, there's nothing wrong with being a feminist.

Can I get a holla for Girl Power!!!

While Dina assumes a feminist affinity with Maya, Maya becomes so annoyed with the above response that she shares it with her family and reads it to her high school students.¹⁶ In addition to her in-class comments that treat this disagreement as a joke, Maya also mocks the metaphorical understanding of a podium in her end-of-the-semester feedback: “The web chat that dealt with my podium in my classroom is still a common topic in my [high school] classroom. My students have now been made aware of the power of the podium, and they embrace it.” By couching her disagreement within a play(ful) framework, Maya represents this disagreement as nothing serious. However, she fails to recognize David’s and Dina’s negotiation as the habituated practices of academic discourse. At the same time, David and Dina fail to recognize Maya’s investment in the value of a podium in the high school classroom. Those failures limit negotiation, thus circumventing persuasion, as expressed in Maya’s rejoinder:

I do want to expand on the discussion over the podium. I do have a podium in my classroom. That podium does not serve to offer a safety zone or as an additive to my authority, rather that podium serves as a place to set my heavy books down. Rather than setting the book on a desk and having my head down, not looking at the class, my head is up and I am able to see the book and my students. Purely for a logistical reason, the podium does have a place in my classroom. I believe that what we discussed a couple weeks ago applies here, sometime a frog is just a frog, and a podium is just a podium—no other hidden messages.

By emphasizing the functional nature of the podium in her classroom, Maya closes herself to the possibilities suggested by David and Dina, thus shutting off any negotiation that might lead to persuasion. By underestimating Maya’s practical orientation, David and Dina offend. In the end, neither Maya nor David nor Dina is persuaded by each other’s interpretations of the podium and, implicitly, each other’s views on the effects of space on pedagogy.

Another unfortunate consequence follows the podium debate when Dina’s post is mistakenly attributed to another graduate student in the course, an outspoken feminist, who is then recognized as abrasive and impolite. Pleasure for Dina resulted in conflict between Maya and this other feminist student, who shares in an end-of-the-semester feedback:

I felt confused and sad when I found out near the end of the semester that one of my comments really offended a colleague. . . . So I did the lamest thing, I just avoided responding to her so as not to hurt her feelings intentionally. . . . Interestingly I wasn’t the one that had posted the response on feminism and

¹⁶ The connection Dina believes she forges with Maya continues through the end of the semester when she addresses Maya directly in her last post, saying: “I always appreciate your commentary because I know that you’re looking at the subject from a different standpoint—that of a high school teacher (which I commend you for). I definitely believe this discussion board has allowed us to consider other perspectives. This, in turn, has allowed us to become more of a community than just another class. Thanks for everything you’ve contributed.”

the podium, but I was mistakenly identified as the one who wrote it. . . . As a result, I think I held back because I wanted to be polite, let her feel unchallenged, and not worry about further complications.

Without the joint recognition that co-creates a context for dialogue, author-centered pleasure may not only yield persuasion but may also result in disagreements which have dire consequences for intellectual engagement and discussion, whether in a classroom or online. What seems appropriate for a writer may not be recognized as appropriate for the reader and vice versa. Pleasure is unpredictable, and persuasion may not follow.

This third example also points to the inescapably temporal, contextual nature of playful persuasion and dissuasion. What constitutes play, humor, and pleasure—the podium discussion endured repeated references in class discussions throughout the semester, testimony of the strong undercurrent of hurt feelings and epistemological disagreements among these graduate students—underscores the importance of time and timing. The temporal nature of pleasurable persuasion highlights how any change in the relationships of the participants effect a change in the potential for pleasure. The contextual nature of pleasurable persuasion demands that all elements act in sync or in coordination through the processes of performance, negotiation, and recognition to prevent closure and to forge a mutual understanding. Any slight misalignment—whether in context creation, negotiation purposes, recognition abilities of the interlocutors, their motives, or discourse models they utilize—and the potential for persuasion may be short-circuited. The unique characteristics of online discussions yield unconventional enactments of persuasion, ones that sometimes fuse pleasure and play, thus expanding the boundaries of those conventional approaches.¹⁷ By understanding the interrelated processes of performance, negotiation, and recognition in pleasurable persuasion, teachers can develop an array of pedagogical strategies that encourage and invite pleasure in face-to-face and online discussions, and, by so doing, extend that pleasure into a repertoire of alternative approaches to persuasion.

Pleasure Matters: Developing a Praxis of Play for the Classroom

Pleasure through play is neither a superficial nor an irrelevant activity; it represents rhetorical risk-taking, experimentation, and improvisation. The emotions, interwoven with pleasure, offer students crucial alternatives to approaching and effecting persuasion that should not be dismissed. To persuade is to appeal through both emotion and reason. As Laura R. Micciche reminds us, “the exclusion of emotion positions reason as the grounds of rhetorical action, ultimately failing to acknowledge the complex aims and desires necessary to incite and achieve action” (164).¹⁸ Because much scholarship highlights the role of reason in persuasion, I emphasize, in this last section, the importance of four emotional attitudes—adaptability, curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking—in developing

¹⁷ For a discussion of the limits of persuasion, see Corder’s “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love.”

¹⁸ See also Lakoff for a discussion of the inextricable reciprocity of logos and ethos in persuasion.

a pedagogy of pleasurable persuasion, one that involves the participation and input of both teachers and students. Not only are teachers the initiators or facilitators of an environment that welcomes playful expressions of pleasure, students also bear some responsibility in issuing invitations to pleasure and being responsive to the invitations issued by others. Because play and pleasure are contextualized, instantiated, reciprocal processes, teachers and students who do accept those invitations may not persuade or be persuaded. Thus, no specific heuristic or formulaic recipe can guarantee the manifestation of pleasurable persuasion.

Online discussions have created dynamic ways for students to read, write, and learn with each other. Unlike conventional reading and writing approaches in face-to-face classroom situations, online webchats involve a tangible, immediate audience to whom students can express their opinions, who will in turn recognize and negotiate with those opinions. Particularly crucial to active learning is an understanding among students that these online discussions should nurture uncertainty, tolerate chaos, and resist closure. Students can test out new, inchoate ideas on their classmates. The particular subject positions writers choose to inhabit—positions that are determined in part by writers' interpretations of that audience and the audience responses to that writer—must attend to a multiplicity of views, opinions, and beliefs. Gee maintains that "real learning is always associated with pleasure and is ultimately a form of play—a principle almost always dismissed by schools" (*Situated* 71). The better teachers understand the quality of play and the dynamic of pleasure, the better we become at inviting and cultivating that play and pleasure.

Pleasurable persuasion may not manifest through a rigidly structured, externally imposed, rule-governed, and tightly orchestrated approach. Rather, teachers and students must participate as active learners with four attitudes that keep the process and product of learning dynamic. These attitudes are neither measurable goals nor fixed outcomes, neither linear nor predictable. The first is adaptability and managing complexity, or

the ability to alter one's behavior, thinking process, or attitude to to [sic] better respond to the needs of diverse contexts and environments in both today's world and the future; the ability to handle multiple objectives, tasks, and inputs, while responding to constraints of time, resources, and organizational or technological systems. (Warshauer 135)

In the third example, Maya, David, and Dina demonstrate a lack of adaptability and an unwillingness to manage complexity. Their individual understanding of the connotative meaning of "podium" is based on their own experiences, a subjective orientation that fails to account for multiplicity in uses and meanings. Maya's resolute belief—"a podium is a podium is a podium"—shuts down persuasion and limits pleasure. To create an environment where pleasurable persuasion may occur, students must embrace complexity. This aptitude for complexity can be seen in Donald Murray's suggestion that "the writer is constantly learning from the writing what it intends to say. The writer listens for evolving meaning. . . . The writing itself helps the writer see the subject" (7). The reciprocity among the writer, the reader, the process, and the product encourages an adaptability that we also see in the second example, when Spencer and Meredith open them-

selves to the vague, undetermined complexity of “nakedness of our language.” Both enter the outskirts of reason and meaning, crafting and questioning even as they try to hammer out a meaning both find acceptable. That adaptable aptitude where complexity is valued as a process and a product is crucial to nurturing pleasurable persuasion.

The second attitudinal orientation is curiosity, or the desire for inquiry that leads to knowledge. When students are curious, they seek out answers, remaining open to multiple possibilities. Rather than engage in a cursory search, which closes off multiplicity, students must commit to intellectual inquiry as both Spencer and Meredith do. Even as the phrase, “nakedness of our language,” attracts both students into a dialogue, they wonder what Marianne Moore or e. e. cummings would do. By contrast, Bryan uses the online discussion to exhibit his witty use of language but fails to spark interest in his classmates, even though the topic seems particularly enticing. Curiosity involves what Gee calls “deep learning,” learning that occurs not through formal instruction but through habituated cultural processes. Students must cultivate an intellectual identity with its attendant habits of questioning, reflecting, and evaluating. Pleasure goes hand in hand with the habit of curiosity.

In addition to curiosity, teachers and students must engage in creativity, “the act of making something that is new and original, whether to an individual or to a broader culture or society” (Warshauer 135). While creativity can take many forms, let me focus on one manifestation that relates to online discussions. As students develop persuasive arguments and enter into dialogue with one another, they balance between two stances: “uneasily hovering between regularity and repeatability on the one hand—the effect of social stabilities and of regulations erected around text to keep them close to ‘convention’—and the dynamic for constant flux and change on the other hand” (Kress 102). Students who are too conservative intellectually may simply parrot or repeat information from the textbooks and lecture. Students who are too resistant may have valuable insights that cannot be understood by the rest of the class because those insights are too transformative. Perhaps this tension is true of example two above where Maya evinces a simple, practical understanding of “podium,” while David and Dina do not make room for Maya’s ontology in their ideological interpretation of the podium. Creativity in online discussions may involve recontextualization:

“Lifting” a genre from one context and putting it in another (lifting it out of its “proper” social context and inserting it in another) is an innovative act, an act of creativity. It changes not just the genre, not just my relation to the text, but it changes also the new context in which it occurs. (104)

Even as Spencer draws on Genesis for his analogy, he is recontextualizing that concept for communication in an electronic age. Because online discussions are “more public, visible, and collaborative” (Warshauer 77), students can avail themselves of “a greater diversity of genres and formats in the laptop classroom. . . . most of this diverse writing would have been very difficult to achieve without computers” (79). This diversity requires creativity, both rhetorically and intellectually.

The final attitudinal orientation is risk taking, which involves “the willingness to make mistakes, put forth uncommon or unpopular positions, or take on difficult problems without clear solutions, so that one’s personal growth, integ-

rity, or achievements are enhanced" (Warshauer 135). In the three examples described above, only Spencer and Meredith demonstrate a willingness to enter uncharted intellectual territory, thus culminating in pleasurable persuasion. When teachers outline their expectations for electronic discussion, they tend to emphasize two areas—edecorum and intellectual work (Yancey 113). However, these two areas may stymie students' propensity for taking risks and traversing unknown intellectual lands. Just as teachers must remember that much learning can emerge from intellectual play, they must decide in dialogue with their students how much "playfulness" they are comfortable with. For example, would teachers be comfortable if students accepted Bryan's invitation by not only discussing but also using profanity in their webchats? Rather than develop esoteric, generalized statements of what is acceptable play, teachers and students must take into consideration the situated, contextual nature of play.

To facilitate positive, productive, intellectually stimulating online discussions, teachers and students need to be less fanatically devoted to middle-class propriety and taste (Bloom). Rather teachers might learn that online discussions invite quick moving verbal exchanges that integrate play and work in positive ways. Instead of monitoring and controlling for inappropriate linguistic behaviors in one or two comments by individual students, teachers could focus instead of the work achieved by an entire group interaction. If teachers begin to recognize that the symbiotic, reciprocal relationship between play and work promises benefits for students, then they might become aware of how play and pleasure might influence the culture of literacy in a traditional classroom setting. Through an open-minded and reflective engagement with these students' discourse, we might consider how play undergirds the pleasure of persuasion and persuasion through pleasure. ☐

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