

## Digital Underlife in the Networked Writing Classroom

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### Abstract

This article offers a theoretical framework for ‘digital underlife’: the distal and potentially transgressive discursive activities proliferated by emerging technologies. Digital underlife is an adaptation of sociologist Erving Goffman’s concept of underlife, which figured centrally in Robert Brooke’s well-known study of writing activity in 1988. As emerging digital technologies fray the communicative bounds of traditional sites for teaching and learning, such as the classroom and the conference hall, we are confronted anew with a complex array of possibilities for giving and getting attention. Drawing on the work of Charles Moran and Richard Lanham, this article calls for a more receptive disposition toward the productive dimensions of digital underlife. The article promotes a stance that imagines productive digital underlife to be intrinsic to curricula that combine digital writing activity and rhetorical education, rather than short-selling digital underlife as mere distraction, as an impediment to learning, or worse, attempting to banish it altogether.

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When I watch students in my classes dividing their attention between face-to-face class discussion and instant messenger (IM) conversations with friends outside of the classroom, part of me wants to pull the plug, march the class out of the computer lab we usually call home, and seek out a real classroom, dammit, one with chairs and desks that we can arrange in a circle and just, you know, talk to each other without distractions, like we used to when I was a TA. This all makes me feel so freaking old. I’m getting over it.

Johndan Johnson-Eilola (2005, p. 23)

When teachers, administrators, and parents seek to squelch digital writing activity, give in, that is, to “pull[ing] the plug,” what else is compromised? In the following article, I pursue this opening line of inquiry as a way not only to grapple with *what is* digital underlife but also to complicate responses to what, if anything, *must be done* about it. Well-circulated reports warn of the ominous implications of ever more dissipated attention, attention divided, re-divided and re-re-divided, drawn asunder due to a barrage of contending informational forces and attractions. The formal scene of teaching and learning has, for everyone involved, changed: teachers are ever more frequently positioned to make decisions—to act—on digital underlife, on the distal and potentially transgressive discursive activities proliferated by emerging technologies, because their work-space hovers near a saturation point of crossed signals and converging wavelengths supported by portable electronic devices and wireless computing. We have observed an unprecedented unraveling of presumably once-ordered domains of the classroom and confer-

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ence hall. An outpouring of cautionary accounts of these fractured communicative conditions chronicle the insidious effects.

Consider Andy Guess's April, 2008 *Inside Higher Ed* article, "Hey, You! Pay Attention!" Guess wrote:

Late last month, as students returned from spring break, the University of Chicago Law School announced that Internet access would be blocked from classrooms. While individual professors at law schools have created policies banning laptops or allowing them only for specific uses—and while some colleges don't even have classroom Internet access, or mandate classroom-only use without any enforcement—the move by Chicago appears to be the first institution-wide directive of its kind. Already, there's been an uproar among students and even senior administrators, while some law professors have stepped up to defend the policy. (para. 4)

Other examples refer to teachers and administrators who have responded similarly by banning various backchannel outlets in recent years, to the extent possible. Administrators have forbidden students from blogging, for example, both because students risked disclosing too much information and because of serious "cyberthreats"; and in the spring of 2006, Michael Bugeja wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Information technology in the classroom was supposed to bridge digital divides and enhance student research. Increasingly, however, our networks are being used to entertain members of 'the Facebook Generation' who text-message during class, talk on their cell phones during labs, and listen to iPods rather than guest speakers in the wireless lecture hall" (para. 1). Expressing wariness toward portable devices from laptops to cell phones and iPods, Guess, Bugeja, and others point out an increasingly common dispersion of attention where technologies intervene into human interaction. Though the reach of these complex issues is broad, the grasp of this essay is considerably more limited: Must teachers of digital writing counter what are framed here as attentional crises? How? And what alternatives are there?

Although I don't want to dwell on the anxious and in some cases nostalgic currents running through many of the mainstream press items concerned with the problem of dispersed attention structures accompanying the rise of digital devices in classrooms and conference halls, neither do I want to defer to hard-lined provisions, such as disconnecting or banishing backchannel activity with policies, as the only recourse for teachers and administrators dealing with digital underlife. Instead, I want to develop the positive proposition that we have several factors to consider when making decisions about the complex dynamics involved with what I call *digital underlife*. Digital underlife encompasses both an ulterior field for illicit communication and the elusive, underground discursive activities proliferated therein with the aid of digital technologies; it evokes an inexact sphere for extraneous, hyper-threaded interchanges—between pairs of individuals or among crowds of users, as often asynchronous as transpiring in real time. Like more traditional conceptions of underlife, new and emerging variations of digital underlife greatly push the limits of institutional rules and roles. More frequently than ever before, transgressions of institutional rules and roles manifest in writing—in the digital packets of discourse that are no longer confined by the physical space of a singular institutional scene. And so it is a crucial concept for us to understand as teachers of writing, particularly when the students we work with are multiply and simultaneously engaged in the production and circulation of writing related to any number of disparate, contending subjectivities.

To explore the implications of digital underlife, I proceed, in this essay, along two axes. The first is a definitional axis premised upon the need for groundwork. To begin to define digital underlife, I draw upon affinities between digital underlife and other terminology, such as "backchannel," related to mediated communication activity. The other is a jurisdictional axis, along which I want to argue for networked models for learning while calling attention explicitly to the stances we take as teachers charged with organizing and managing classroom spaces and activities. I seek to renew consideration of the array of writing activity encompassed by digital underlife. This renewal will proceed by tracing the concept through selected scholarship in rhetoric and composition: Robert Brooke's (1988) work on underlife in the writing classroom, Charles Moran's (1998) study of teaching in low-tech and high-tech classrooms, and Richard Lanham's (2006) theorization of economies of attention. Beginning with the concept of the backchannel in digital communication, I make the case that our decisions and policies regarding digital underlife in the writing classroom should be developed with an understanding that peripheral or distal communication, like most forms of institutional underlife, can be suppressed, but not without consequences. Those consequences have implications both for teachers and students when negotiating the attention structures of the classroom. They also confront us with the paradox of teaching networked, digital literacies—electracies, to adopt Gregory Ulmer's (2003) term—while at the same time denying the dispersed, digressive attention structures (i.e., wandering curiosity) such literacies demand.

## 1. Conceptual resemblances: Backchannel and digital underlife

What's happening isn't new. It's just been transformed by the new tools at our disposal. Before the wifi-enabled backchannel started to emerge, there was still a backchannel. You sat next to people you knew, and whispered to them. "Did you hear that?" "Hey, doesn't that remind you of xxx?" "What did she say?"

—Elizabeth Lawley (2003, para. 7)

What is the conceptual resemblance shared between digital underlife and what are more commonly known as backchannels or backchannel communication? "Backchannel" names a subsidiary discursive scene; it refers to distal communication activity associated with a central event, often circulating beyond the apprehension of a focal speaker (Lawley, 2004b; DiMicco, 2004; Hall, 2004; Lawley, 2004; Rose, 2004; McCarthy & boyd, 2004). According to Sharon Cogdill, Tari Lin Fanderclai, Judith Kilborn, & Marian Williams (2001), linguists have in certain contexts used backchannel to refer to conspicuous non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, head movements (i.e., nods of assent), and sounds—counterparts to verbal responses—uttered to verify ongoing attention and to report comprehension in the presence of a speaker. The term backchannel, with its many valences, has also served as a way of describing communication relegated to covert interchanges—the leaks of an insider who sought to evade accountability or, in strictly militaristic applications, a unique band for encrypted chatter—the call of commands to an outpost, the report of a scout, all dependent on managed opacity.

In many cases, backchannels manifest beyond an observer's gaze, and as such, once apprehended, the backchannel cedes its "back"-ness. This potential elusiveness brings with it an unavoidable methodological quandary. To the watchful ethnographer hoping to capture a glimpse of activity, oftentimes in the form of observable interchanges between members or small groups in an audience or in a classroom situation, the channel risks being spoiled or altogether vanquished by policy or other authority, much like the subdued (and perhaps eventually redoubled) intensities following the teacher's interception of a passed note. This problem is even more pronounced when the participation is not restricted to a single physical scene. In other words, because wireless networks now exceed traditional physical boundaries, the latest iterations of backchannel activity are radically more distributed than they were just fifteen years ago, when research by Marshall Kremers (1990), E. Laurie George (1990), and Alison Regan (1993) addressed matters of "wilding" and teacher authority in bounded local-area networks.

With the rise of wireless communication networks, portable electronic devices, such as cellular phones and other mobile apparatuses, have reconstituted backchannels, accelerating a growing number of distal circuits and related communication activities into the twenty-first century. In recent years, backchannels have garnered new attention, in part the result of Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that are designed so users can share status updates with others and deliver them to user-managed social circles. The term backchannel has also passed into more common parlance due to the pervasiveness of digital communication devices in institutional settings—such as national technology conferences—where interchange among an audience is encouraged, even while a speaker is presenting. The varied, participatory activity possible within the backchannel—whether critical asides circulating among audience members in an unofficial channel or questions and comments relayed by a moderator to a speaker—has greatly expanded to involve networks that test the traditional limits of the institutional scene. Because we cannot summarily identify such networks as nefarious or benign, they ought to be of great interest to scholars concerned with the communicative intervention of the digital apparatus, particularly as they usher new dimensions of rhetorical activity into institutionally conditioned spaces, such as classrooms and conference halls.

The point here is that backchannel activity, and so too underlife, adapts with the times. The connotations of backchannel have changed radically in the age of new media and, as well, in a time of what Howard Rheingold (2002) called "smart mobs," the *ad hoc* coalitions made possible by networked writing practices. Understanding backchannel and also weighing recent reactions—both critical and laudatory—is useful for gaining traction on digital underlife as a kind of "mobile smarts" that does not, by virtue of spatial constraints alone, begin or end at the classroom door, whether the class is on campus or online. Having acknowledged a few of the changing aspects of backchannels, I argue that we might reconsider digital underlife as potentially productive. That is, revisiting the merits of backchannels might, in part, persuade us to embrace digital underlife as productive rather than relegating it to the realm of mere distraction and, by default, resisting it as an impediment to teaching and learning.

Ongoing conversations about blogging should contribute further insight into the changes I am identifying and the dissonance between students and teachers that lurks in the very idea of "productive." This situation is especially

palpable in Jill Walker's (2007) weblog entry, "The Novelty of Blogs is Wearing Off?" Walker explained that she requires students to blog for the classes she teaches even though "most of them hate it, only a very few of them actually post assignments on time and only the guy who already was an active blogger uses it as I'd intended" (para. 1). Compulsory blogging does not have the same purchase for students in her classes as it has for her. An accomplished, long-time blogger, Walker reckoned with this tension: what has functioned for her professionally and personally as a productive underlife activity does not necessarily generate for her students the same enthusiasm and uptake, especially when the activity is required of them as part of a course. Walker maintained that there is, nevertheless, some value for her students in the encounter with blogging as a potentially productive networked writing practice; she has students include two entries of their choosing in a portfolio at the end of the term of study. Yet the most promising, productive aspects of blogging *for her* as often as not fell short for her students.

If this is so, if we recognize that our own underlife activities do not simply carry over—in energy, enthusiasm, and importance—for students, what might this suggest about the reverse, especially for digital natives, those learners who are serially immersed in networked writing, much of which manifests as a backchannel practice? Walker's scenario parallels Todd Taylor's (2006) suggestion in "Design, Delivery, and Narcolepsy," that, among other things, we ought to respect those underlife practices students already participate in, that we ought to learn more about them on a case by case basis, and that we ought not to relax in thinking that one-size-fits-all policies defining networked communications in the classroom respond sufficiently or responsibly to the innovative, generative ways students may be using such technologies.

By pairing this new concept, "digital underlife," with "backchannel," I aim here to refresh questions about what happens when we teach in the midst of extracurricular, networked discursive activities that aggressively and often successfully compete for human attention. I am especially interested in developing a framework for using the *expanded* backchannel both as a cause for us to consider productive digital underlife and as a phenomenon that complicates commonplace—even pervasive—stances on economies of attention, particularly in environs that encourage the use of computer technology to foster emerging forms of digital writing and experimentation.

## 2. Toward an understanding of digital underlife

[T]he network of discursive practices cannot be eluded by willing that it disappear.

– Thomas Masters (2004, p. 61)

Having established basic similarities between backchannel and underlife, I want to deepen the concept of digital underlife by revisiting Robert Brooke's (1988) Braddock-award winning essay, "Underlife and Writing Instruction," in light of contemporary networked writing practices. Adopting an ethnographic methodology, Brooke nested his research project in accounts—as a participant-observer—of the subsidiary activities he saw unfold among students in first-year writing courses. His project called for critical reflection on the various activities often labeled categorically as "distraction"—note-passing, whispering, and other digressions in focus on the primary channel, often centered on the locus of the teacher's directives and sufficiently aberrant to the institutionally defined roles for students to qualify as underlife. To develop his research methodology, Brooke drew heavily on anthropologist Erving Goffman; he cited Goffman's work in two books, *Asylums* (1961) and *Stigma* (1963), as the impetuses for his thinking about underlife, which he defined as "the activities (or information games) individuals engage in to show that their identities are different from or more complex than the identities assigned them by organizational roles" (p. 230). Underlife, as theorized by Goffman and elaborated by Brooke, is a confluence of social interactions, information games and organizational roles; Brooke accounted for each of these elements early in his essay. In the context Brooke developed, underlife bears a striking resemblance to backchannel communication:

Exactly because organizations offer definitions of identity, they also offer individuals the opportunity to respond to the definitions in creative ways. Because definitions of self exist in organizations, individuals can give information about how they see themselves by rejecting the definition offered. Institutional underlife is exactly such a case: actors in an institution develop behaviors which assert an identity different from the ones assigned them. (1988, p. 231)

Wherein underlife accounts for an array of behaviors, as a stream for subverting the primary communicative channel, backchannel—in conference sessions and classrooms—names the discursive space in which actors might unobtru-

sively “assert an identity different from the ones assigned them.” This potential is noteworthy; in it we find a vital correspondence between the backchannel domain and underlife activities related to writing. In simple terms, the backchannel allows for the subversion of institutionally generated forces of convention and decorum, although, to be sure, backchannel can also be put to more strategic, planned uses, such as when it is recorded.

From Goffman—who contends that “underlife behaviors are a normal part of institutional life,” Brooke derived two types of underlife: *contained* and *disruptive*. With this pair of terms comes all the trappings of an authoritative view of the classroom. Underlife, which is enacted in backchannel spaces, if characterized solely in terms of containment and disruption, suggests that student activity occupies a position secondary to institutionally sanctioned activity, and this sanctioned activity is primarily ordered from the locus of authority embodied in the teacher. Activity that eludes the teacher’s apprehension, accordingly, also complicates the degree to which institutional roles govern the activity—communication and behavior—in the named environment. How are institutionally valued discursive practices ruptured, subverted, and transgressed not only by individuals but also by emergent clusters—networked coalitions—enabled by the conditions of backchannel communication and spirited forms of underlife?

Although Brooke’s project did not offer any outright answer to this challenging question, he proceeded with a view of the classroom that generally positions individual student-actors who engage in different forms of underlife just beyond the teacher’s field of vision, and his work importantly complicated dynamics involving information games, roles and identity negotiation in the writing classroom. Brooke (1988) observed four major categories accounting for underlife in the writing classroom subject to his study:

- Creative departures from the teacher’s desired activity (p. 232);
- Commentary on assigned or requested classroom roles (p. 233);
- Evaluations of what is going on in the classroom (p. 235); and,
- “private activities whereby an individual divides her attention between class activity and something else” (p. 236)

Among these tenets, Brooke suggested that the first—creative departures from the teacher’s desired activity—is the most common; in their quiet exchanges, students often digressed from the lesson plan while maintaining an appearance of being “on-task.” In this relatively felicitous appearance of remaining attentive and focused within each of the first three conditions, student underlife—according to Brooke—matched with Goffman’s conception of contained activity. The fourth type, “private activities,” suggests that the teacher cannot be comprehensively aware of all underlife in the classroom. Brooke was interested in accounting for the teacher’s perspective which, because “students aren’t paying attention,” presumes their behavior to be disruptive. He argued that underlife—much like the backchannel activity elaborated earlier—is purposeful if “students are actively connecting ideas in the classroom to their own lives outside the classroom, and are discovering ways in which classroom knowledge seems useful even when (or especially when) it isn’t used for classroom purposes” (p. 233).

In his conclusion, Brooke argued that writing emphasizes a turn away from the relatively passive, compliant modes of behavior he observed in contained underlife—modes in which students withhold the “interesting parts” of themselves (p. 236). He characterized writing as an activity correspondent to disruptive underlife, enabling students to thwart compliance with institutionally assigned roles in favor of more autonomous identities:

When we look at writing instruction from the perspective of underlife, it appears that the purpose of our courses is to allow students to substitute one kind of underlife for another. Instead of the naïve, contained form they normally employ, we’re asking them to take on a disruptive form—a whole stance towards their social world that questions it, explores it, writes about it. (Brooke, 1988, p. 239)

Notably, Brooke attended to the solitary student-author, a figure who, by writing, assumes a singularly disruptive stance, composing against the grain of the institutionally determined roles for students. In recent years, however, many students are actively writing in digital spaces and thus composing their social worlds with unprecedented effects and expanded means of circulation. In this age of networks, individual, isolated students may appear to be writing by themselves, “privately” defining their transgression against institutional roles, but just as often, they are composing in more outwardly social venues, entering into highly interactive exchanges prone to drift across multiple institutions, even transcending institutionality. The network trumps the school as the reigning social system, now in ways more tangible than before. The basic disruption of the institutionally defined roles can be read not only through the actions of an individual but through the clusters that emerge among students. By calling Brooke’s important

work forward into the age of digital technology and coupling it with the phenomenon implicit in backchannels, we find that the communication and learning at the periphery, often beyond the purview of the teacher or speaker, is commonly interlinked and potentially productive, particularly when it is infused with writing or constituted by a digital inscription whose record extends beyond the event itself. These conditions also suggest that networked spaces—latent with potentially productive digital underlife—can refigure the institutional identities and conventional orderings of behavior relative to long-standing norms for institutional authority.

### 3. Monitoring the gaze in the networked writing classroom

“Everyone knows what attention is.” So said William James in 1890, and so too have I said repeatedly in my courses and lectures on attention. But the statement is false, quite false. We really do not know about attention, to a large extent because we do not know about consciousness.”

—Donald Norman (1981, p. 279)

The stealthy omnipresence of digital underlife also alerts us to evolving relationships between space and attention. Whether practitioners regard it as an encumbrance or an opportunity, digital underlife transforms the physical scenes of teaching and learning and calls into question default approaches to verifying attentiveness that have long privileged visual verification. The inadequacy of the “gaze” as a standalone metric for assessing attention has, with the development of digital underlife, grown more conspicuous. Commonplace labels such as “computer-mediated classroom” and “traditional classroom” serve well enough to identify general differences between kinds of classroom spaces, but they do not sufficiently capture the porous and distributed qualities of attention structures in the age of networks. Portable devices add new dimensions to these site-based categories: traveling technologies and the networks they sustain now seep across classroom spaces, often in spite of the material constitution of the space and the institutional plan for how such space might be put to use. Thus, because digital underlife subtly redefines spaces, it also tacitly redraws the structures of attention manifest in a given classroom space. For teachers of writing in “computer-mediated classrooms” or “traditional classrooms,” it is common to feel as though we have lost a grip on any consensus among our students regarding space-attention propriety. As spatial-attentive dynamics shift, so must our thinking change about the visual verifiability of attentiveness.

From a historical standpoint, Charles Moran’s (1998) “From a High-Tech to a Low-Tech Writing Classroom: ‘You Can’t Go Home Again’” dramatizes the shift in space-attention propriety many have witnessed with the rise of portable devices and wireless networks. Moran keyed on lines of sight as he told the story of how he switched back to what he called a “traditional classroom”—a classroom absent computer technologies. By way of his title’s allusion to Thomas Wolfe’s famous novel—Moran returned “home” to a traditional classroom, and, upon doing so, he experienced jarring contrasts between the visually verifiable attention structures in computer-mediated and traditional spaces. Upon returning to the traditional classroom, Moran “found the students’ gaze disturbing” (para. 27); their eyes, he observed, were no longer staring monolithically at a monitor, but were askance, peering in many different directions—toward the window, toward one another, and toward him. Moran’s “unusual autoethnography”—an approach he adapted from Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991) “Arts of the Contact Zone”—concluded that teaching in the absence of computers after teaching with them challenges teachers to re-think assumptions about the deliberate structuring of attention most appropriate to writing instruction.

Of particular note is that where Moran wrote of being most unsettled by the contrast between teaching in the two different classrooms, his self-reflective study relied heavily on ocular-centric evaluations of attention. Portable technologies and the boundary-spanning networks ushered in with them confront us anew with uncertainties about what students are doing in class—a predicament that re-emphasizes that there are many varieties of meaningful attentiveness. Consistent with Moran’s conclusions, differently equipped classrooms present instructors with a number of ongoing challenges related to the circulation of teaching documents, the nature of social interactions among students both within the boundaries of the formal meeting time and extensive of class sessions, and the related senses of authority and control experienced by the teacher. Much like Brooke’s ethnographic report on underlife, Moran’s narrative sets out from a synoptic, teacher-centered perspective of the classroom. Recounting the dynamics in the traditional classroom, he cited the journals kept by students in which they disclosed that they experienced the course primarily through him—the teacher; yet, Moran also recognized a different kind of *attention* to his role in the classroom. Without computers, he functioned like a highly-connected hub through which all focuses gained legitimation, which suggests his perception

of centrality in the traditional space. The point here is that the rise of contingent, mobile networks reasserts the idea that a group's collective attention is never monolithic; it cannot be easily summed. As arbiters of attention, teachers of writing can scan an audience to assess, in a glance, purely physical indications of engagement, but we nevertheless have limited means to conduct spontaneous assessments of consciousness and understanding. Such nebulous aspects of mind have proven to be highly uneven and idiosyncratic. That variations of underlife can account for the richest, most lasting encounters might suggest to us that subsidiary, non-primary channels simply work better than we often give them credit for, particularly when it comes to writing. If this is valid, how would such a proposition change our thinking about the presence of digital technologies and conventional attitudes about the economies of attention most appropriate for teaching and learning in classrooms?

As portable devices—iPhones, mp3 players, laptops, Blackberries, and so on—arrive on the scene, bringing with them vast extra-institutional networks, the lines blur between the traditional classroom, the computer-enabled classroom, and the worlds (real and virtual) at large. Mobile, wireless devices have further challenged us “to adapt to social change as it affects our institutions, our classrooms, our teachers, and our students,” as Mike Palmquist, Kate Kiefer, James Hartgiven, and Barbara Goodlew noted in *Transitions* (1998), their 1993–1994 study of technology-related teacher training and computers in the classroom at Colorado State University (p. 3). Commonplaces about attention structures continue to be deeply entangled in these ongoing transitions. The strict correspondence between attention and the gaze has come unhitched. From a synoptic perspective, the gaze indeed tells us something about engagement, but it doesn't tell us everything there is to know. Judging by the gaze alone, estimations of total attention are bound to be incomplete. Students' economies of attention encompass generative fields of activity—as often as not, giving way to distributed, fragmentary consciousness, attuned in a complex orchestration across highly varied attractions and playing at once across conceptual, material, and digital orders. As Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) reminded us, students are now writing themselves into networks and, without being assigned to do so, they are also actively composing in new media among multiple lifeworlds. These conditions highlight the plurality of attention structures and, now faced with multiple attention structures, the perspectival limits of a teacher's gaze become all the more problematic. The gaze affords us but one measure—line of sight—through which to ascertain the projection of a focus, and while it remains reasonable to suggest some loose correspondence between line of sight and visual attention, this method for assessing attentiveness is in and of itself insufficient for making sense of the increasing interventions proliferated in digital underlife and related backchannel activity. Ocular-centric assessments of attention are due for further expansion if we have any hope of complicating teacher-centered classroom models with a greater understanding of the complex and competing underlife activities playing out in our midst—underlife mediated by the technologies we ever more commonly attempt to teach alongside.

#### 4. Productive digital underlife in an attention economy

The official theory of learning spread its tentacles so rapidly that it was soon unquestioned, taken for granted as the way the world has to be. The common wisdom of the classic view of learning was suppressed. There was no possibility of learning from the company you keep because there was no company to keep, only drills and exercises. No alternative was ever mentioned or considered. Interaction among students, or between students and “outsiders,” became a distraction.

– Frank Smith (1998, p. 57)

In recent years, we have witnessed more than a few expressions of views on digital underlife and its detrimental function in the time-honored spaces of classrooms and conference halls. This essay opens with a chosen few of those perspectives, adequate though they are to trigger associations with the experiences of teachers from kindergarten to advanced graduate courses. I suspect that many of us who teach on a regular basis have encountered unanticipated interventions of digital underlife in our classrooms. Consequently, a deepened understanding of digital underlife is both timely and practical.

In addition to laying the groundwork for digital underlife by sketching a definition of it, I also propose that when weighing decisions about what to do about digital underlife, we must take on a more receptive attitude to the plausibility of its productive dimensions. That is, rather than reducing digital underlife into the dyad of contained and disruptive, we might add productive as a positive third term—particularly where we understand such underlife to enable meaningful discursive practices beyond the schoolroom. While urging a more receptive disposition, the following section of this

essay forwards specific recommendations for addressing digital underlife, and it does so while keeping open the possibility that such underlife may be productive and generative—a welcome presence rather than a predetermined hindrance to learning. One great difficulty here is in concretely resolving what is productive about digital underlife for students. Moreover, productive underlife practices are not easy to generalize, and so this proposition ties in with radically student-centered theories of writing instruction, such as those advanced by Taylor (2006). Like Jill Walker in her experiences with asking students to blog, many of us experience first-hand certain online rhythms, patterns, and activities that are generative and productive while at the same time remaining behind-the-scenes relative to our outwardly professional lives. Blogs, Twitter, and Facebook are among the applications supporting productive digital underlife for growing numbers of writing teachers—“productive” because these platforms provide connectivity in many of the ways traditional institutional scenes cannot, and because these writing practices yield tangible, collaborative works (e.g., conference proposals, conversations, informal drafts). Yet embracing the idea of productive digital underlife with students requires a small leap of faith, one that acknowledges the new possibilities. Is it, after all, “productive” when a student uses a cell phone or laptop in class to consult Wikipedia? Is it “productive” when a student glances fresh content churning into Google Reader in the brief inventive moments after a teacher has gone over a new writing assignment? Who can say? What should be clear is that these practices reach in varying degrees beyond Goffman’s (1961; 1963) “contained” and “disruptive” dyad.

Recent discourse about demands made by new and emerging technologies increasingly refers to an “attention economy” or an “economics of attention”—a phrase I have selectively invoked elsewhere in this article. Richard Lanham’s (2006) latest monograph, *The Economics of Attention*, takes up this topic extensively, explaining what he perceives to be an all-out reversal of material things (i.e., “stuff”) and their attention-getting aspects (i.e., “fluff”) with striking implications for the academy, the humanities, and culture at-large. Following Peter Drucker, who, in 1959, anticipated the onset of an information economy and its key figure the “knowledge worker,” and Herbert Simon, who, in 1971 warned of a swell of information and the revitalization of filtering as a tactic for dealing with it, Lanham accounted for a new scarcity in human attention, a scarcity that unravels many assumptions about the academy and that, in turn, radically revalues “liberal education.”

As it reiterated and amplified this point, Lanham’s (1994, 1993) monograph also collected and built upon materials he delivered in articles and presentations over the past ten years or more. For instance, in 1994, he gave a talk called “The Economics of Attention,” in which he extended one of the concluding arguments in *The Electronic Word* (1993)—that human attention inevitably *oscillates*, running along a continuum that allows for everything from the most monolithic and narrowly focused attention to far more scattered, disjointed, and dispersed varieties. In *The Economics of Attention* (2006), this point resurfaces, as Lanham noted that “Our attention is richest and most powerful when it oscillates between everything that *at* vision does and everything that *through* vision does” (p. 178-9). Oscillation underscores variability; it asks us to accept that no one—even a highly focused state of mind—traps attention seamlessly. Disjunctures in attentiveness are unavoidable—perhaps even worth embracing, considering that one might find such a perfectly synched attentiveness among students only in a bizarre fictitious scenario in which students behave as automatons. After introducing four attention spectrums (signal, perceiver, motive, and life), Lanham went on to explain, “A particular act of attention will connect a point on one spectrum with a point on another. Together they will constitute knowledge” (2006, p. 179). To be clear, my aim here is not to advocate an anything-goes approach to attention where order is obliterated and replaced with pandemonium. Rather, I am suggesting that we create a space for the connective knowledge Lanham identifies.

The emergence of more complexly entangled media demands of practitioners broadened perspectives on the ways attention manifests in whatever spaces we do the work of teaching and learning. We are faced with unavoidable challenges compounded by the coupling of always-on social possibilities enabled by technological apparatuses with our valuing of student agency and power over their discursive spaces and activities. The classroom, in short, persists as a space in which such conditions must be recognized or, to the extent that we don’t recognize them, a space in which everyone is amenable to the multi-channel communications continuously enacted, often at the expense of a shared focus. Reconciling curriculum and pedagogy with such forces is just one of the great challenges for the twenty-first century academy, and it can be done, in part, by reflecting with students on the knowledge Lanham described, knowledge that takes shape in oscillating acts of attention that connect across varied attention structures.

In the interest of renewing attention to attention and addressing the question of jurisdiction—what must be done about it?—I now end with four practical suggestions for enriching our understanding of the



shifting dynamics where digital underlife might be reframed as productive in our burgeoning attention economy:

- **Recognize a range of attentional demands as opportunities.** Foremost, we must remain fully cognizant of the growing range of attentional demands placed on students both in and out of our classrooms—attentional demands exerted both by people and by things. Are some of these attentional demands in line with the aims and goals of classroom-based education? Of course. But we must know more about them. We can do this, first, by engaging with these online applications ourselves, by sampling from the large number of Web 2.0 platforms so that we understand what is available. Additionally, teachers should ask students about their uses of mobile technologies, perhaps even making plain their own uses. We stand to gain great insights when we make the array of attentional demands more tangible. Contending forces need not be mysterious or assumed to occupy a contrarian position to classroom activities. Such conversations about digital underlife or the roles and uses of technologies for learning might take place in general class sessions, in one-on-one or small group conferences with students, or in assignments and projects designed to address such things. A technological self-portrait or digital literacy sketch is one assignment I have used to engage with the attentional demands of new and emerging technologies while also gaining some sense of students' dispositions toward technologies at the sites of teaching and learning. In tandem with this suggestion, we might adopt a stance like Lanham's and, so doing, continue to re-think the importance of rhetorical education in the twenty-first century for the way it prepares students to command attention across a wide range of rhetorical performances—written, oral, visual, and digital.
- **Reflectively enact attention-getting and attention-giving.** Following Jim Crosswhite's (2006) address on "The Future of Attention" at the New Research Summit, we must take seriously the parts we play not only as attention-getters, but as attention-givers. Because, as Crosswhite argues, "[t]here is an interaction between our giving our attention and someone or something else's getting it," (para. 7), we must assume a disposition that aspires to be conscientious about attention-getting and attention-giving—particularly as such activities often involve a complex, layered, and synchronous orchestration of multiple streams of attention. We can model for students our own habits and devices of attention-giving and attention-getting, especially where we are using platforms or applications they know well, such as Twitter, Facebook, Delicious, and blogs. If successful, we can expect students to be more acutely self-conscious of the interdependence of giving and getting attention as crucial tensions for networked writing practices, rhetorical effectiveness, and extracurricular learning.
- **Appropriate responses to shifting attention dynamics beyond the academy.** We must not only look to rhetoric scholars such as Crosswhite and Lanham but also remain aware of and receptive to the ways those in the technology sector, distance education, and other domains have addressed this "comedy of plenty" (Lanham, 2006, p. 13). For instance, in her address titled "Your Attention Please" at the 2005 Supernova conference, Linda Stone (2005), a career executive at Apple and later Microsoft, discussed the complex interplay of new technologies and functional adaptations that she called "continuous partial attention." Stone's concept emphasizes the decidability of attention in business meetings as she accounts for the way Microsoft has allowed for an array of attention-giving profiles to co-exist in a given meeting based on the places attendees sit. In other words, as attention structures grow potentially more complex and as related demands accumulate, we are more forcefully confronted with a range of possibilities for engaging with happenings in our environments that enlist attentiveness. According to Stone, Microsoft makes this range explicit so that everyone present at a meeting understands that those at the periphery have decided to engage only partially with the person leading the meeting. On the scale of a full writing curriculum, Rebecca Rickly (2006), writing about Texas Tech's creative responses to shifting demands on the first-year composition program, explained in "Distributed Teaching, Distributed Learning" the ways she and her colleagues adopted a collaborative approach to instruction and assessment by making use of networked technologies. Rickly, drawing on Krista Ratcliffe's (2005) work on "rhetorical listening," ultimately argued that WPAs must listen "to those ideas unfamiliar (or unpalatable) to us," such as those circulated among corporations. At the convergence of Stone's "continuous partial attention" and Rickly's report on Texas Tech's innovative workarounds, the reason for looking far and wide for responses is clear: the academy is not alone in facing down challenges wrought by an accelerated attention economy.
- **Welcome promising adaptations of digital underlife across the curriculum.** We must resolve ourselves toward open, adaptive dispositions, receptive to developments across the curriculum, such that we are aware of innovations in blended and hybrid learning, both at our own institutions and elsewhere. As teachers, we must take stock of

the ways in which digital underlife is framed as promising and productive through curricular developments, from iTunes University (in use at institutions such as Duke, Texas A&M, Stanford, Eastern Michigan, and California-Berkeley), and the incorporation of Second Life in innovative courses, like the ones developed and taught by Sara Robbins at Ball State University and Alex Reid at SUNY-Cortland.

In a related vein, Joseph Ugoretz (2005) has written about the productive dimensions of asynchronous chat, both for online courses and in blended curricula. Significantly, Ugoretz notes that asynchronous discussions provide relief to the time-bounded constraints normally imposed on attention structures in education. Students he studied were able to determine the outer reaches of the discussion, becoming, “involved in their learning as active participants” (para. 11). Ugoretz termed this phenomenon “productive digression”—an apt pairing for digital underlife—and went on to argue that teachers need “to develop policies to reward, not punish, this type of participation” (para. 18). Chatting and instant messaging have, of course, evolved greatly in recent years, but we should begin to investigate more thoroughly what we can learn from students who engage in twittering, microblogging, or texting in class.

All four of these responses to “What must be done?” suggest a modest change of heart while implicitly valuing the bi-stability and oscillation Lanham has argued for throughout his career. I offer these suggestions knowing full well that they directly reinforce the idea that the larger article works toward: a more receptive disposition toward productive digital underlife. Yet, as we understand from following Linda Stone’s (2005) keynote address, acknowledging the productive potential does not mean that all our work is finished—that magically, if we call it productive, everything thereafter will become productive. Teachers will continue to craft policies that negotiate institutional expectations, curricular possibilities, and the semi-predictable underlife habits of students. My hope is that, having considered the limited case I make for allowing that digital underlife might also be productive, they will do so with this possibility in mind and pause before making blanket declarations that altogether ban digital underlife after framing it exclusively as a nuisance. The attentional demands placed both on us and on our students, after all, will continue to multiply where new and emerging technologies provoke changes in reading and writing. Who will accept that such conditions are not inherently at odds with the sort of productive, imaginative intellectual work we expect of students?

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