Walls with a Word Count: The Textrooms of the Extracurriculum

This article examines text-based locations (*textrooms*) as a third strand of the extracurriculum of composition. Through a diachronic analysis, I examine the nineteenth-century periodical *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and three twenty-first-century blogs as coauthored classrooms or powerful sites of women’s informal writing education.

The location of writing is more than an address identified on Google Maps or a particular room and building number. Texts—not just rooms—have long served as venues for writing instruction, offering learning opportunities to individuals who lacked access to or were disenfranchised by classroom education. Discursively constructed alternatives, such as the self-help books on writing or Peter Elbow’s early composition books, have played as important a role as brick-and-mortar sites in writing education (Gere, *Writing*; Gere, “Kitchen”; Peary). Text and physical space can be permeable, mutually shaping forces, as evident in Nedra Reynolds’s exploration of composing spaces and Jessica Enoch’s analysis of nineteenth-century school rooms as “rhetorics of space” in which “material and discursive practices . . . work to compose and enhance a space” (276). Moreover, physical space does not unilaterally define textual production: influence can flow the other direction such that discursive

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Textrooms are learning spaces constructed by individuals as they write and publish—essentially establishing a coauthored classroom. The walls of the textroom are constructed from the very words of the learners and teacher.

Spaces impact traditional education. As Tom Reynolds argues, popular early twentieth-century magazines sponsored the classroom by increasing public interest and attendance in college. Consequently, we need to redefine the location of writing instruction to include the convergence of learners and instructors in textual spaces alongside three-dimensional ones to gain a fuller understanding of how individuals learn about writing.

This article examines text-based locations for writing instruction as a third strand of the extracurriculum of composition, to join self-help books on writing and face-to-face writing groups. Like self-help books, including Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones* and Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, textrooms are constructed from words; like a face-to-face writers’ gathering at a neighborhood coffee shop, textrooms are participatory. Unlike these groups or books, textrooms are learning spaces constructed by individuals as they write and publish—essentially establishing a coauthored classroom. The walls of the textroom are constructed from the very words of the learners and teacher. In contrast to typical self-help books on writing, text-based sites involve more than a single writer’s testimony and are instead locations built on the recorded written interactions of multiple participants of varying expertise (novice to established author) around the topics of writing and publishing. Mentorship occurs through participants’ display of their texts, which range in formality (published comments to essayistic or researched articles that have undergone editorial review). Opportunity for freelance submissions is characteristic of text-based sites as a way for editor-teachers to showcase final products of constituents’ writing processes and provide alternatives to hegemonic texts as models. This publishing component disqualifies a Facebook group, for instance, of creative writers who might be exchanging information about professional opportunities. Unlike a face-to-face writing group in which conversations about writing evaporate, textrooms are epigenetic, providing a stable record of instruction, a trail of interactions to which learners can return at any time with a standing invitation to future learners. Textrooms are also generative and democratic: the more learners discuss, publish, and post, the more extracurricular opportunity they afford other writers: the higher the word count, the more learning opportunities exist for participants.
Through a diachronic analysis of two extracurricular sites for women writers separated by over 150 years, one a nineteenth-century magazine, *Godey’s Lady’s Book,* and the other a trio of blogs—*Mother Writer Mentor, Her Kind,* and *She Writes*—I examine women’s discourse about composing and publishing across sites of writing. Like Margaret Beetham, who pairs the mid- to late nineteenth-century magazine industry in Britain with the twenty-first century Web, finding similarities in the way both foster “imagined communit[ies] of women,” I see continuities in “word-based technologies” from different eras (235, 232). By linking two seemingly dissimilar locations of learning, I hope to show that *Godey’s* and the blogs are not distinct phenomena but instead are part of an enduring system of informal learning. Through the textrooms of *Godey’s* and blogs, women across centuries define female authorship as a viable profession for women and construct a system of support through articles or postings sponsoring the writing of other women. The magazine and blogs function similarly as informal writing classes operating communally, but with one or more central founders/editors who act as sponsors of female publication. In her work with the extracurriculum, Anne Ruggles Gere has encouraged scholars to look for unusual teachers in unusual places (“Kitchen”)—and in the textual extracurriculum, the founder or editor functions as teacher. The teachers of textrooms provide a range of writing opportunities for participants that include lower-stakes interactions to more polished and editorially reviewed genres. Another shared attribute is the way they enable participants from a range of expertise—novice to celebrated, prize-winning author—to exchange writing experience. Both magazine and blogs therefore provide a comprehensive view of women’s writing both in terms of who is involved in the discussion and what types of texts are shared: process-note-like submissions and real-time responses on chat forums are juxtaposed with texts that have passed editorial review; first-time authors appear beside celebrated writers such as Catherine Sedgwick or Dara Wier. Furthermore, women writers at both sites negotiate domestic and public identities pertaining to gender and composing, making writing an embodied activity factoring in sexism as well as pregnancy, breastfeeding, and menopause. Perhaps most powerfully, text-based sites allow women writers to collectively (re)define female authorship in light of societal hurdles; what James Zappen
has identified as characteristic of digital communication—“self-expression for the purpose of exploring individual and group identities”—is also true of pre-Internet *Godey’s* (322).

It is important to note that text-based sites are not constrained to cyberspace. While scholars including Andrea Lunsford and Jodie Nicotra have discussed how the Web has transformed writing into the “building of a space rather than the production of a text” through collective participation, textrooms can occur under the auspices of traditional forums like magazines (263). The vitality of text-based sites is demonstrated by how they predate the computer era and by their continuance despite the exponential increase in opportunities to pursue formal training through BA, MA, MFA, and PhD programs in writing—on-campus, undergraduate, graduate, low-residency, and online programs—in the United States.¹ Since textrooms allow for the formation of communities defined by racial and socioeconomic characteristics or by genre, discussion of the writing process can become more specific—less about general writing anxiety and more about the challenges of balancing childcare with finishing a draft in the case of the women writers of *Godey’s* and blogs. While the identity of users of the text-based sites examined in this article is women writers, text-based sites for African American male poets, adolescent journalists, and so forth could easily form, if they don’t already exist.

Finally, as Anne Ruggles Gere has explained, the variety and number of meeting places is important to the extracurriculum, which has historically provided access to writing instruction to individuals unable to obtain a traditional education because of socioeconomic obstacles (“Kitchen”). The textrooms examined here further reduce limits to women’s writing education—although in the case of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, this benefited mainly Caucasian middle- and upper-class nineteenth-century women. *Godey’s* enrolled more subscribers from the mid- to late nineteenth century than any other monthly periodical, with five hundred times more readers than the influential *Dial* (Finley 24), and the blog aggregator explored here, *She Writes*, has 24,047 members as of the writing of this article. Overall, textrooms engage significantly more individuals than most other off-campus sites such as a single literary society, an Athenaeum lecture, or coffee shop writing group.

**Magazine as Location**

*Godey’s Lady’s Book*, with its long publication run from 1830 to 1878, is associated nowadays with fashion plates depicting antebellum women in bonnets and
enormous hoop skirts, a sort of Victorian Vogue. In fact, as Patricia Okker has pointed out, *Godey’s* offered “an amazingly diverse collection of material” (31). Examining a full issue shows that range of content. The January 1861 copy presents sheet music; illustrations of a Turkish lounging cap and opera cloak; part one of a fictional series called “Sunshine and Shade; Or, the Governess”; several other pieces of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry; receipts for poultry and plain puddings; discussion of charity in the Editors’ Table; floor plans for a Southern mansion; an article on how to manage hair loss; and in Literary Announcements, announcement of new books, which continues for two and a half pages, longer than other departments. Susan M. Cruea has suggested that *Godey’s* perpetuated the myth of True Womanhood—of women’s reliance on male protection—by displaying luxury items and status symbols to be bought with male wealth (189). What is overlooked in such evaluations of *Godey’s* is how the magazine functioned as a platform for training women in authorship. As Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of *Godey’s*, states in the January 1861 issue, “While paying every attention to the ornamental department of our Book, we do not neglect the solid matter,” and then points the reader to the quality of the literature—written by women—in the issue.

In the nineteenth century, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* served as an informal writing class, one built dialogically by the women who read and submitted work to the magazine but organized chiefly by the editor Sara Josepha Hale. In the extracurriculum of composition, literacy training involves not just changes in location but also new facilitators, those not conventionally identified as teachers (Gere, “Kitchen” 80). As Gere says, to “uncouple literacy and schooling” we need to “separat[e] pedagogy from the traditional pedagogue” and “acknowledg[e] a wide range of teachers” (80). Editors function as informal teachers in textrooms. Under Hale’s tenure, *Godey’s* was a locus for the mentorship of women writers, an activity she sustained an extraordinarily long period, 1837–1878, through the complex societal changes of the century. Hale transformed the magazine into a text-based site of learning, encouraging women to become textual producers and not just remain consumers or passive admirers. Hale herself was no stranger to literary production, publishing seven poetry books, six books of fiction, several books on housekeeping, and a nine-hundred-page historical reference work on women’s accomplishments, in addition to continuously writ-
ing for the magazine (Okker 1–2). Hale also provided aspiring women writers with literature written by contemporary women—no small matter given Hale’s own professed regret that the only book by a woman she could obtain as a girl was Ann Radcliffe’s 1794 *Mysteries of Udolpho* (Okker 40).

Unlike a traditional classroom with a roster of enrolled students and catalog course number, in extracurricular settings the informal “class” is built from the ground up by one or more leaders. Participants frequently need to be encouraged to join and shape the purpose and procedures of the learning context. In later decades Hale leveraged female readers’ desire to become published in such a renowned magazine, but early on Hale had to encourage subscribers to submit their writing by redefining the roles of “reader” and “writer” as well of “editor” (Finley 24; Okker 13). The brunt of content in early issues was anonymous and actually written by Hale herself, a situation she concealed to create the illusion of a community of writers: “If readers accepted the pretense that many different writers contributed to the publication . . . they would have thought the number of published writers was higher than it actually was. Since Hale’s readers did sometimes become writers, they may have submitted material based on the assumed success of others” (Okker 88). In addition to this ruse, Hale developed an ethotic appeal as that of an equal, what Okker calls a “sisterly editorial voice,” to ease anxiety about women leaving the domestic sphere for the public domain of publication (23). To foster that intimacy, *Godey’s* adopted the practice used by other magazines of the day like *Harper’s* and *Peterson’s* of naming editorial columns after pieces of household furniture, the Editors’ Table and Godey’s Arm-Chair, suggestive of chairs pushed closer between intimates. Hale’s rhetorical footwork included the application of pathos—the allure of a suggested friendship with a powerful woman as well as shame in disappointing her. In an 1837 issue of *Ladies Magazine*, Hale’s first magazine before the merger into *Godey’s*, Hale published a rallying cry, “Hints about Periodicals,” in which a Mrs. Phelps calls readers to task for not assisting Hale in the Herculean task of preparing the monthly magazine: “Of the many gifted women in our country, how few have felt their obligation to lighten the labors of the editor by their own contributions” (665). Phelps singles out Hale’s publication, saying that not any magazine will do for women’s literary efforts: just this magazine, the only magazine edited by a woman for women.

As a textroom, *Godey’s* formed itself from the very writing opportunities it afforded its participants and did so by providing individuals who ranged broadly in writing expertise with a variety of chances to publish. Although the
preeminent women's magazine of its day, *Godey's* printed articles by women at all career stages on the experience of writing and publishing. *Godey's* publications extended from process note–like pieces to more polished genres. Accounts by successful women of their career beginnings provided insight about writing as a vocation; testimony from novices—even individuals who simply longed to write—was valued along with advice from seasoned authors. A striking example of this is “My First Attempt” from December 1864, in which the unnamed author begins: “It has been the great ambition of my life to be an authoress; not that I have dared to think of being a famous one—I *may* come to that point some time—but thus far I have felt that I should be satisfied if I could but see something of mine in print” (501). The author enumerates reasons why she has not published anything: a discouraging teacher and her fear of an editor's rejection. The remainder describes in hypothetical terms what the author *could* write, including her revealing her decision “not to have any subject this time” and that if she is “allowed to come upon the stage again, [she] will begin with my subject at once” (502). Paradoxically, she has published a piece about her desire to be published; the meta-writing is evident in her concluding request, made directly to the editor, that he (male though Hale is the editor) “will react [to her piece] after dinner, when he is in a good humor” (502). In addition to printing something as unformed as an individual's bald wish to be a writer, *Godey's* published accounts of novices' first experience with literary success. In “My First Venture” from May 1864, Harriet E. Francis describes how her elation at the newspaper publication of two poems is crushed by an aunt's bitter reaction. The writer listens to her aunt from another room:

“Well, what of it?” was the reply, in a voice so cold and chilling, that it jarred like the crushing down of some great lifetime hope. “I guess there is something else to do in this world besides writing poetry. A wife and mother, too; what folly!” and I could hear the excited thrumming of her fingers on the table, and the angry clash of the door as she passed out to attend to some household duties. (473)

Francis is comforted by her sister, who assures her that she does her share of the housework, but to little effect because “out of the door with a great sorrow that loomed like a death-pall o'er the brightness, and joy that for a few hours had beautified my life” (473). In another article, “Early Struggles of an Authoress,” Fanny Fielding offers a more optimistic view of career beginnings, including how she had challenged an editor's decision to reject her first poetry submission, leading to its acceptance and to a terrific display of support from her father and brothers for her “literary gladiatorship,” who surprise her with
a nocturnal serenade based on her poem. The learning benefits of this range are multifold: a more comprehensive view of a writing career for women; the “study” of contemporary texts penned by other women rather than canonical, patriarchal texts; the incentive for novices to hone their craft to resemble the featured publications. Moreover, as is discussed with the blogs, learners at Godsey’s were given access to a range of mentors not typical in a creative writing classroom in which there typically are a single expert and novices of fairly similar ability.

Another source of informal training occurred through acceptance and rejection of submissions at Godsey’s. Hale interacted with freelance authors by publicly listing accepted and rejected manuscripts for upcoming issues in the Editors’ Table column under a section called “To Correspondents.” After issuing a statement describing the overwhelming number of submissions received (sounds familiar today), Hale categorizes submissions by their titles, withholding writers’ names, as “Admissible” (accepted); “Promising” (“those giving evidence of literary talent which may, by persevering study, make the writers distinguished”); “Mediocre” (“indicating that literary success is not likely, though we do not say impossible”); and “Hopeless” (Hale says the writer should not be encouraged to hope for “literary eminence” but wishes that the experience of composing incurred the writer personal gratification). Hale provides a bit of feedback but adds that she can’t meet authors’ expectation for extensive critique, offering them this ditty: “If accepted, gratified. / If rejected, satisfied.” One of the June 1841 “Hopeless” submissions is a piece called “I want a wife” (the title evoking Judy Brady’s piece from the inaugural issue of Ms). Hale says that this piece lacks “scholarship” but is sincere and stylistically intriguing; she provides an excerpt of the rejected piece for readers to decide whether she has made the right choice (282). In September 1841, concerning a submission in the “Promising” category, Hale encourages a novice poet, praising the young person’s “humble appeal,” and quotes from the poem (which again is about the desire to be a writer). Hale extensively quotes four tercets from “A Marriage in New England” (practically like having the whole piece published) and provides the heartening feedback that the piece “has truth of description and, in some stanzas, a deep, touching pathos, which is really beautiful” (140–41). Women who participated in face-to-face writing clubs in the mid- to late nineteenth century could obtain feedback from a group-appointed critic or by reading aloud to the club (Gere, Writing 44). However, in an era before the now ubiquitous Iowa workshop model (in itself based on the practices of extracurricular
While Hale defended women’s writing and helped professionalize women writers, her intention was not to help individuals achieve literary fame, but rather to enlist women in service to a greater national identity. Literacy wasn’t the acquisition of skills by individuals but was instead tied to republican ideology and to nation-building, and mothers were the prime instructors of this “home-based learning” or “motherly teaching,” which in turn established the United States’ imperialism or “manifest domesticity” (Robbins 3, 16, 2–3). John Bolles, writing in June 1831, portrayed this extracurricular function of women’s writing as a “women-led pedagogy” (31). In a September 1864 issue, Hale describes how successful women writers are able to enter other women’s homes “throughout the world” and offer their “noble teachings,” derived from a combination of texts and moral lifestyles (71). The textroom of Godey’s, like any classroom, was shaped by the ideology of its teacher. Hale, like the literacy sponsors detailed by Deborah Brandt in Literacy in American Lives, provided educational opportunity as a “by-product of the struggles for economic or political ascendancy in which they are involved . . . as a way to recruit or coerce those resources to their cause” (70). While Godey’s helped women readers envision the possibility of publication, it simultaneously set about to define female authorship as a matter of domestic purity. Godey’s, as did many nineteenth-century periodicals, promoted the idea of separate gendered spheres and justified female authorship through women’s idealized domestic identities (Okker 15; Baym; Brown 178–84). Women were expected to write for selfless reasons, and craving for fame had to be redirected toward the betterment of others in- and outside the family. Prohibitions against female “literary vanity” were frequent. As Hale proclaims in an 1864 Editors’ Table: “if a woman enter the field of authorship, let her do it always in that spirit which seeks for other rewards than the world can give; let her feel that the mission of her pen is to elevate and bless humanity.” These restrictions on female success were typical of how self-education for antebellum women was framed. According to Joseph F. Kett, in The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties, whereas nineteenth-century men could dabble at various subjects in the extracurriculum, women “condemned themselves for the self-indulgent literary pursuits that had proven so advantageous to men” (75).
Since many of the articles published in *Godey’s* featured female writers as characters and used a plot line about composing and publishing, Hale’s agenda was directly manifested in the content. Hale’s position on proper writerly motive, for instance, appears in Clara Julien’s 1872 “The Rejected Manuscript,” a short story describing the struggles of Alice Malin, a wealthy young girl cast into poverty upon her father’s demise. Malin attempts to support herself and her mother by approaching her uncle, an editor whose lack of scruples causes her to approach another editor. When Malin becomes wealthy from her writing, her no-good uncle asks that she write for his publication; when she refuses to “write for so base a man,” he becomes bedridden from a bad conscience. Malin tends him at his bedside, and the story ends by attributing Malin’s professional success to her devotion to the sick. In “My Attempts to Win Fame,” Margaret A. Smith recounts how as a teenager she sought to be as famous as her favorite novelists and wrote for base reasons. Smith is rejected by a string of editors and never tries again, but she says she is glad for how her life resolved: “I have found my true sphere at last, in becoming the old maid instead of the genius of the family” (508).

Hale’s gendered ideology also appeared in discussions of the writing process, another part of the informal curriculum of *Godey’s* and one atypical of its day. Although manuals such as the 1857 *How to Publish: A Manual for Authors* barely mentioned invention and revision, *Godey’s* continuously reminded novices of the “long apprenticeship” involved in authorship, one that entailed drafts, revision, and effort. For Hale, maintaining a writing process was to possess purity of motive in that it demonstrated discipline to craft. Female writers and wannabes were upheld or criticized based on the extent to which they worked through the process. In a column called Authorship, Hale advises that “[y]oung ladies might greatly improve their education by the habit of writing out their impressions and putting their ideas or fancies on paper. Write, my young friends, as much as you can” (399). To be avoided was the false notion that excellent work could happen in a single draft—or over the space of one night, as is the case of the doomed, personified manuscript in Thomas Carmichael’s *Autobiography of a Rejected MS*. Testimony from established authors reinforced the importance of sustained revision. In “Early Struggles of an Authoress,” Fanny Fielding ends her account of her successful literary career with the following advice:
To write, re-write, erase, correct, revise, put away, take out after a long while, read again; not to be too tender for love of your own, not to be too sensitive in the matter of lopping off a limb here and there, not to make a lumbering sentence or one not to the purpose to bring in a last word or phrase that will “tell,” or a pet idea; not to be unmindful of the fact that one’s work reads very differently in the cool by-and-by from what it did in the reactionary stage, the flush of accomplishment. (69)

*Godey’s* frowned upon procrastination and idle daydreaming about literary success: in the anonymous story “Mrs. Page’s Life History,” a woman finds reasons to delay writing her novel until twenty years pass and her husband and two children are dead.

Conservative motives undoubtedly shaped the writing instruction provided by *Godey’s*, but that agenda was complicated by the multitude of other ways in which Hale struggled for women’s rights. Regulations about motives for writing occurred alongside articles and advertisements advancing women’s opportunities outside the home. For instance, Hale’s 1862 editorial statement Authorship appears beside a piece arguing for women’s employment in post offices, an article supporting a women’s medical school, and an advertisement for Miss S. J. Hale’s Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies in Philadelphia. *Godey’s* was thus characteristic of the forum of periodicals in general: “Even magazines which defined their readers as ‘domestic women’ or ‘fashionable ladies’ often dealt with women’s campaigns for access to higher education, or reported on suffrage meetings” (Beetham 234). More importantly, Hale’s efforts took on the most pressing dimension of helping anyone professionalize—making a living. At the same time as *Godey’s* combated so-called literary vanity, it responded to a very different motive, dire financial necessity, for female authorship in the nineteenth century. Publication often served as the sole source of income for women upon the demise of or abandonment by a supporting male relative (Degler 379). Hale was not unfamiliar with this pressure for publication, as she turned first to sewing and then to writing poetry and fiction in order to support five children—the eldest seven and the youngest born two weeks after her husband’s early death (Finley 18). *Godey’s* was remarkable for its protection of authors: it was the first American magazine to copyright its contents and follow the Federal Copyright Act of 1790, and it compensated more than other periodicals, providing a livelihood to writers including Edgar Allen Poe and Catharine Sedgwick (Okker 91–92).
Godey’s also helped women counter societal hurdles to female authorship, helping them collectively negotiate domestic and public identities pertaining to writing. Godey’s provided a forum for women writers to share frustrations incurred from the profession at a time in which women writers often faced backlash. Representative of many magazines, an article in an 1858 issue of Harper’s, for example, recounts how “the illusive charm attached to the idea of a female author became, indeed, changed to a horror from which I have never wholly recovered” (“Authors” 787). The author describes a meet-and-greet event for a celebrated female author, an “Amazonian novelist” with “masculine proportions, coarse features,” whose voice was “so like the rougher sex that I began to think she was a man in disguise” (787). Women writers also often faced opposition from men in positions of power in the publishing industry: Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, who infamously scorned the “damned mob of scribbling women” or J. G. Holland, founding editor of Scribner’s, who insinuated that female desire for a writing career was a way to compensate for failure on the home front. Other books exposed the tribulations of women writers, including Eliza Leslie’s The Behaviour Book and Anna Cummings Johnson’s The Myrtle Wreath (which features a successful woman writer literally crying in a corner because she feels domestically unfulfilled), but Godey’s allowed a greater range of experiences because of its provision of shorter pieces by multiple authors. In a single issue, a triumphant story of one woman’s literary success could appear a few pages from a troubling story of discrimination for being a “blue stocking.” In “Genius in Woman: Its Fate and Its Reward,” Mrs. Samuel M. Alexander portrays the fates of two cousins: the cousin who is interested in literature and starts her own school to support the both of them upon their family’s financial ruin is passed over by a suitor for the less studious cousin, basically a “bookish girls don’t get the guy” cautionary tale. In “A Slight Sketch of Miss Jumble’s Career,” the author’s fiancé nearly abandons her because of her publications; members of the wedding party, intimidated by her success, nearly don’t show up to the wedding. In the 1857 “Why I Am Not an Authoress,” the narrator describes frequent interruption by family members and servants who are scornful of her writing practice. The story is set before her wedding day; she has abandoned the idea of a writing career after her fiancée, who deems her fiction good, nevertheless warns her away from the difficulty of the profession.
Blogs as Location

Online communities for women writers are the most recent incarnation of the discursively constructed extracurriculum. Blogs are rooted in the extracurriculum; the first blog was created in 1994 by a Swarthmore undergraduate, Justin Hall, as a hobby which he sustained for eleven years (Rosenberg; Thompson). In their proliferation, blogs constitute the robust “self-sponsored discourse” of the extracurriculum to be distinguished from the “obliged discourse” of the traditional classroom (Hesse 349). Only twenty-three blogs were included in 1999 on Infosift, a blog compilation site, but by the end of 2011 some 181 million blogs were in existence, with an increase internationally by 145 million alone between 2006 and 2011 (Blood 7–8; “Buzz in the Blogospher”). The three sites examined in this article, *Her Kind*, *Mother Writer Mentor*, and *She Writes*, were selected because of their significant number of participants and their breadth of topic: unlike other sites, these did not limit for geography (as would a blog for Vermont writers) or by genre (only science fiction).

Amplifying the extracurriculum of *Godey*’s, these online textrooms utilize the affordances of technology to provide mentoring, craft instruction, discussion of process, critical examination of contemporary women’s literature, and discussion of the working conditions of women writers. A glance shows women counting down the days to their book’s publication, a researched article on the seventeenth-century writer Alpha Behn, an account of returning to writing after childbirth, a description of a poet’s writing cabin, the use of lists to establish self-discipline, and an interview between Amina Cain and Veronica Gonzalez-Peña.

The extracurriculum has historically provided educational access to nonmainstream individuals, but the virtual classroom of the blog further eliminates basic geographic and financial differences. Presuming access to the Internet, these textrooms offer a free, open-access education, with not even the annual subscription fee of *Godey*’s: no need to pull together travel funds for a retreat or writing conference. The dialogic nature of learning in a textroom is more apparent in the blogs due to the provision of both synchronous and asynchronous learning. The multiplicity of social media platforms—including the basic Comment function, microblogging, Twitter, IM, and email—enables learners to communicate and publish in almost real time and avoid the lag time faced by a *Godey*’s learner who had to wait for the arrival of the magazine and...
Hale's editorial responses by mail. The walls of the digital textrooms rise much faster and with a greater range of compositions and composers. In addition to gathering women at all stages of their writing careers, the blogs bring into conversation women of diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (Ben-Oni, interview). These blogs thus seem a twenty-first-century manifestation of the “overlapping, technologically driven writing circles, what we might call a series of newly imagined communities, communities that cross borders of all kind” (Yancey 301). As Cait Levin, editor of She Writes, states, “The ability to connect instantly with women all over the world is unparalleled in any ‘traditional’ writing community,” and this widespread access is also evident in the Global Woman column at Her Kind (Levin, interview). It is possible for a woman to gain a substantive, non-degree-bearing education in writing and publishing from these textrooms without ever setting foot in a workshop or enrolling in a graduate degree program because almost everything is available at these locations—mentoring, quick advice, venting, feedback from peers, feedback from more seasoned writers, exchange of professional tips, and research.

Similar to Godey’s, the blogs function as informal writing classes that operate communally under the varying supervision of one or more founders or editors who sponsor female literacy. At Mother Writer Mentor (founded in 2011), editors Jessica Powers and Tania Pryputniewicz introduce themselves as “Your Guides.” Powers describes her editor role as one of mentorship; she encourages people to guest post, suggesting topics and providing revision suggestions as needed, along with promoting authors’ work on Facebook and Twitter (Powers, interview). Mother Writer Mentor differs in its interrelation of writing and one strand of female identity (parenting), a focus evident in its mission statement of helping women manage “life transition” and the “dual focus” in order to “be the best mother and the best writer possible.” In the mission statement, Powers and Pryputniewicz declare the establishment of “empowering support for maintaining a vision of wholeness and possibility when it comes to the dual role of motherhood and writing” and propose that this support is possible from “the solace of the words and direct experiences of those who have gone down the path ahead of us.” The editors at Mother Writer Mentor also teach online writing courses and offer a program to “help writers at all stages who would like a mentor” (Powers, interview). The focus of Her Kind (founded in 2012 by Cate Marvin and Erin Belieu as an offshoot of VIDA: Women in Literary Arts), on the critical examination of societal reception of women’s literature, is reflected in the blog’s name, derived from the persona poem by Anne Sexton. According to its mission statement, Her Kind provides
a “forum to create lively conversation about issues that are often dismissed or overlooked by the mainstream media” and to help women writers “define their own terms regarding the importance and value of women’s voices.” As current editor of Her Kind, Arissa White describes her role as “curat[ing] a literary experience for our readers . . . to make this site welcoming so that any woman writer would feel she has a place there” (interview). White’s coeditor Rosebud Ben-Oni sees her role as chiefly fostering diversity and solicits submissions to that end (Ben-Oni, interview). She Writes (founded in 2009 by Deborah Siegel and Kamy Wicoff) is arguably the most dialogic and therefore the most comprehensive of the textrooms due to its use of social media, as is discussed below. The mission statement of She Writes points to that comprehensiveness when it positions itself as “the premier destination for women writers, providing information and support for women at every stage of their writing lives.” The name utilizes the broad pronoun of “she” and the action verb in the present tense: its title encompasses many stages in women’s writing careers and writing processes as well as remaining open to different genres. The seriousness of the text-based site as professional opportunity, first evident at Godey’s, is also shown in its mission statement, which describes She Writes as a “community, virtual workplace, and emerging marketplace for women who write.” Cait Levin, community manager of She Writes, speaks to the particular access to writing education historically afforded by textrooms when she commends the blog for its allowing women to pursue their education “at your own pace” (Levin, interview).

Similar to Godey’s, digital textrooms provide participants of varying expertise with a low- and high-stakes range of writing and publishing opportunities. The editors of both Mother Writer Mentor and She Writes operate magazine and book publishing venues separate from the blogs—the e-zine The Fertile Source and Partnership Publishing at She Writes Press, respectively—instances of high-stakes writing occasions. By sponsoring these more traditional avenues of publication, the editors bridge the informality and low-stakes nature of the extracurriculum with the exhibition of polished work. In addition to these “off-site” venues, the technology of the blogs plays a central role in discussions of writing process and the exchange of writing experience and advice, and technology factors into the extent to which a blog textroom is dialogic. For instance, Mother Writer Mentor publishes essayistic blog posts by women, affording women opportunity for more formal publication, along with the opportunity...
to comment. Likewise, many of the posts at Her Kind are formally written and resemble articles found in a craft magazine such as Poets & Writers or scholarly journals. Her Kind offers four features—Lady in the House, On My Mind, Global Woman: Reports Beyond the Pale, and Conversations. On the right side of its home page appears a box with recent comments and an invitation to follow Her Kind on Twitter. In October 2013, the editors’ theme was banned literature, and the Conversations column showcased Cantomundo, an organization of Latino poets, and the recent banning of books in Arizona. Lady in the House, entailing the interview of a single woman author, includes a writing exercise around the current theme. In October, B.K. Loren, an award-winning nature writer, provides the following assignment, first describing how vintners find poor soil ideal for grapes:

As writers, as women, we sometimes grow up on difficult ground. In other words, our roots are not as “nutritive” as they could be for what we want to become. The ground is not “inviting.” We are not generally expected to have a prominent voice [but we] do have prominent voices that shape our world as a whole. We have voices that shape our culture. So here's the prompt: Write a few paragraphs about your own native soil, how it formed you, nurtured you, gave you a thick (or thin skin); write about how you made this ground luscious and intoxicating.

She Writes proffers a plethora of services, sponsoring women’s writing through instruction, publication, and contests by employing webinars and live chats, as well as featured guest posts. A rolling announcement on the home page lists She Writes Press Coaches, She Writes Webinars, She Writes Contests, and She Writes Community along with a Twitter feed (members are invited to comment on their own writing activity) and a Top Content stream. Featured posts include “Anonymity and Misogyny Online and How It’s Pushing Us Out” and “What I Learned While Networking at AWP.” Alongside these more formal articles are informal interchanges similar to the process-note-like publications by novices at Godey’s that occur through social media. For example, under the Forum Discussion of She Writes Community, one member reflects on the question “What’s the absolute best use for new writing material?” and on the even more interactive chat forum, topics are bantered about that include a book giveaway by a Christian romance novelist and a virtual book tour announcement for Authors of Interracial & Multicultural Romance & Fiction. As a result of this range of publishing opportunities, novices and more seasoned authors freely mingle with a quieted role for the blog editors, increasing the number of potential learners, mentors, and informal teachers.
Just as Godey’s published women with a range of writing expertise (from beginner to acclaimed), the blog textrooms enlarge the conversation to include women at different career points. This is in contrast to a typical intracurricular setting—an MFA program or composition course, for instance—in which the class is organized around a single expert instructor and generally students of similar standing in the writing world. The net effect is that “instruction” is decentered, with participants gaining more opportunity to learn from a wider range of expertise—an inclusivity that is reflected in the mission statement of She Writes, which characterizes itself as “providing services and support for women at every stage of their writing lives.” Conversations, a column at Her Kind, places two women writers in discussion with one another, sometimes in response to a passage from a third woman author (Gloria Anzaldúa, Alice Walker). Established writers such as Dara Wier and Gillian Conoley appear in one conversation, but other columns showcase women with a briefer publication record. For the editors of Mother Writer Mentor, the blog serves a different purpose than their magazine The Fertile Source. Whereas with the magazine, Powers and Pryputniewicz decline submissions based on their editorial standards, the blog is a “venue for the voices of writing mothers regardless of where they were on their public trajectory of publication” (Pryputniewicz, interview). Moreover, like Godey’s, these sites offer testimonials from published authors even if it’s a first-time publication. For example, Jennifer Richardson describes the path to her Americashire: A Field Guide to a Marriage published through She Writes Press.

The online extracurriculum alters women’s experience of the writing process by further emphasizing the unfinished, the in-process, and the daily over final product and high-stakes publication. According to Tania Pryputniewicz, blogging allows women writers “to have both their process and the polished work created by that process validated by peers and other bloggers” (interview). Blogs seem inherently less final—more discussion than final draft—and provide “visibility and connection while the writer still pursues the formal channels of print publication and online publication by juried sites” (Pryputniewicz, interview). These sites showcase women’s writing regardless of whether it passed through editorial scrutiny. Social networking also enables women to discuss their daily personal life with broader audiences in order to explore the day-to-day work of writing (something Godey’s authors could only do retro-
spectively.) While a nineteenth-century writer could submit a piece to Godey’s detailing her first publication, her article would undergo the week- or month- or year-long process of editorial review. With blogs, however, discussion of one’s process can be nearly immediate, as is the case at She Writes—once a woman becomes a member, she can blog or Tweet about that day’s writing experience. For example, Susan Conley tweets “Countdown to Publication, 34 Days” concerning her forthcoming novel from Knopf, and another woman posts about her composing process: “I FINISHED. A draft. Time for a modest celebration.” Instead of fictionalized renditions, social media allows more direct, kairotic discussion by women of their writing experience.

At the blogs, women writers negotiate domestic and public identities pertaining to gender and writing by validating women’s experiences, like Godey’s, as part of a composing experience. Blogs redefine writing process to incorporate—rather than rejecting or overlooking—women’s experiences in the domestic sphere. Posts mention the need for balance between multiple identities—or “the convergence of identities” (Bonnici, interview). In a witty imaginary interview with Virginia Woolf at Her Kind, the interviewer quotes Toni Morrison and explains to Woolf: “For women writers of today, the child sitting on a mother’s lap is a symbol of our time. Women are constantly having to juggle their responsibilities. I wonder what you think of this?” Guest bloggers describe trying to attend a bookstore poetry reading with a four-year old in tow after childcare arrangements fall through or returning to writing a month after childbirth, with post titles like “Poetry Moms Attempt Night Out” and “Juggling a Kid on a Hip at a Snooty Literary Conference,” or at She Writes, the discussion thread with the title “Book tour with baby in tow?” In one post, Tania Pryputniewicz writes:

It’s not that I can’t stomach poetry anymore—though, on occasion, I too, dislike it (as Marianne Moore writes in her conscience relieving poem Poetry)—but after eight years of either pregnancy or nursing a baby I’m used to sleeping by nine. I’m grateful we escaped, edging back to the public world of poetry.

Since it’s likely a woman will experience changes in domestic responsibility during her lifetime, and possibly motherhood, the extracurriculum helps situate women’s writing in women’s lived experience in a way not covered in typical school-based curriculum. Like Godey’s, these online forums expand the discussion of process to include time constraints as experienced by women writers who have households to maintain, addressing tensions that arise from trying to balance writing with responsibility for others. Blogs allow women
“to stay somehow connected to writing during periods of time when they are otherwise secluded from work environments” and help women find the time to be politically and creatively engaged (Pryputniewicz, interview; Gerrard 299). In addition to the domestic sphere, women’s embodied experience is included in this view of the writing process—details altogether absent at Godey’s. Bloggers endeavor to incorporate their physical lives as women into their writing identities—aspects that could potentially eject the woman from the circle of professionals—such as babies, menstruation, and menopause. This embodiment experience is evident, for instance, in the groups “Hello, God, It’s Me, Aging Gal” and “Women with Breast Cancer, Write” at She Writes.

One of the most powerful functions of these textrooms lies in how they redefine female authorship to counter societal constraints, including cultural-educational institutions for writers. This definitional footwork can be overt: in the Lady in the House column at Her Kind, the interviewee is frequently asked definitional questions for terms including womanhood, bitch, and mother. As with Godey’s, an important extracurricular component of these blogs involves the definition of female authorship in response to discrimination in the publishing arena. Featured posts include “Anonymity and Misogyny Online and How It’s Pushing Us Out” and “VIDA 2013 Count: Do You Count?”—about the statistical exposé conducted annually by the umbrella organization for Her Kind, VIDA, of the percentage of women published, reviewed, or employed as reviewers by publishing powerhouses including Harpers, the Paris Review, and the New York Review of Books as well as smaller literary journals like Tinhouse. The blogs are also critical of cultural institutions for their exclusion of women writers such as the Breadloaf writers’ conference or the annual conference of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (Powers, interview). As Gere has said, one of the characteristics of the extracurriculum at large is its critique of traditional educational systems (“Kitchen” 81). In “Stop Hiding, Start Asking,” Powers recounts how her graduate program refused to factor her advanced pregnancy into her semester’s performance. Powers sees Mother Writer Mentor as countering this problem: “the mentoring we provide takes a writer as a whole person and offers mentoring in that context” (interview). It also makes sense that twenty-first-century women writers would turn to blogs: women writers often face bifurcation of identity inside academia, and “women-only support structures” can allow women to be their whole selves (Barry et al.).
Ultimately, this definitional work is accomplished by both *Godey’s* and the digital textsites. In this regard, the writing sites resemble other types of “women-only spaces” that “function to create a safe space for women to come together, share experiences, and build confidence away from male-dominated culture and space, which they see as structured by male interests” (Withers 693–94). It could be said of the Victorian women writing for *Godey’s* with fountain pen as well as the blogger in 2014 with iPod or baby monitor that these sites seem to be “moving beyond the tools and meaning-making that [women writers] have inherited from our various patriarchies” (White, interview). In a post at *She Writes*, editor Kamy Wickoff muses on the number of women-centered organizations that she has founded, adding, “and now I’m thinking about starting a chick poker night at my place on Fridays.” Wickoff continues, explaining the power of women’s support structures as “the places and spaces where I can [be a writer and a Woman Writer] aren’t ghettos or hide-outs. They are fueling stations, where I power-up and increase my power-to’s. I come to them not to escape the world, but to fortify myself to flourish in it.” Indeed, it’s the structure of textsites—both magazine and blog—that enables a powerful hermeneutic definitional defense against societal hurdles to female authorship. Because textsites construct a classroom entirely around the compositions and writing experiences of groups of women, and because the texts studied by the informal students are those of fellow women, an important force field is established to counter societal backlash, whether contemporary or Victorian. Textsites are built democratically and entail few to no break-ins by male canon or male critique. The students are female; the informal instructors are female; the texts are written by females; the readership is female. This creates a cycle of validation of teaching, practice, and acknowledgment.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the implications of text-based writing sites for classroom writing instructors are worthy of pause—in the same way the extracurriculum of writing groups and self-help books has been of interest to the traditional curriculum. Both of these extracurricular strands have provided teaching practices and even course content that became indispensable for the intracurriculum—creative writing as a course of study from nineteenth-century literary clubs and Peter Elbow’s workshop method from *Writing without Teachers* come to mind as obvious examples and have been explored by other scholars. Textrooms point to deficits in traditional writing education, chief among them the sense of writing as a lifelong process affected by and embracing life circumstances.
Our curriculum does not in general speak to the changes in life that will surely parallel our students’ experiences of writing after they leave our physical classrooms, graduate, and contemplate writing without their teachers. Examining textrooms such as *Godey’s* and the blogs helps identify the types of resources individuals seek after their time with us (presuming a formal education). In a possible adaption of textrooms for the formal curriculum, we might give thought to implementing these resources individuals need to succeed in their writing when not with us. How could a course be built, word by word, chiefly on students’ writing—textbook, class discussion, feedback, and evaluation? How could a composition course be structured such that it put into conversation writers of different levels and abilities (seniors and first-year students in the same required course) and put on display texts from a range of genre and ability? How could the number of mentors in a course increase beyond the single expert teacher (the use of undergraduate teaching assistants)? Could acceptance for publication (resulting in display on the “walls” of the textroom in a designated high-stakes column) be used in place of a letter grade, and could students’ written “walls” remain in place for the next semester’s group of students? Could a blend of asynchronous and synchronous learning platforms provide such a site, in part to develop a different discussion of writing process with students reacting to their composing experiences in near real-time? Textsites present a remodeling opportunity for the traditional classroom.

The persistence of these text-based learning sites—emerging with the proliferation in female publication in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing to the myriad of publishing and formal education opportunities for women of the present—testifies to writing as a field of deep human interest. Coursework is short; our writing lifetimes are hopefully long. Individuals have historically been interested in learning more about composing, and this should come as a welcome validation of our efforts as a discipline. It’s clear that individuals are compelled to write long after final revisions, projects, and grades have been submitted—long after the location of the traditional classroom has been exited—and that individuals will organize and gather in order to fight for the right to write. In honoring the alternative locations of the extracurriculum and its learners, what could be more noteworthy than a location that makes the...
compositions of its students of such central importance, so “centrally located” as to be the classroom? At these multiauthored textrooms, the ranks of sponsors of female literacy increase, and the divisions of teacher/learner, expert/novice, publishing/instructing become more fluid—increasingly so with digital composition and social media. It’s a shift in the location of writing that’s happened across centuries and will likely continue article by article, post by post.

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Note

1. D.W. Fenza, director of the Associated Writing Programs, the largest organization of creative writers, called the twenty thousand to thirty thousand students earning graduate degrees in creative writing between 1996 and 2006 a “swarm” (30).

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