Episode 11: Interview with Collin Brooke

Run Time: 29:59

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer, host)
CB: Collin Brooke (guest speaker)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer, host)

Cue music: "Quartz Boy" by Pixie Lord.

AH: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

AH: Hi, everyone. This is Allison Hitt, and we're talking today about rhetoric and composition's increasing interest in all things digital. We see this in online academic journals, new media pedagogies, a growing demand for people with tech savvy, and scholarly conversations about coding, data visualization, and other digital humanities endeavors.

Collin Brooke has been immersed in the digital humanities and doing work at the intersections of new media and rhetoric for years. He's the author of *Lingua Fracta: Toward a Rhetoric of New Media*. And on Collin vs. Blog, his old website, he posted nearly 1,000 entries over the course of five years. He still blogs occasionally on cgbrooke.net about issues relevant to the field.

In today's show, Ben Kuebrich and I talk with Collin about digital publishing, the value of new media scholarship, and getting involved with the digital humanities community.

Cue music: "Emo Step Show" by Custodian of Records.

AH: I wonder if you could describe the different types of digital publishing that you do, the extent to which you consider them academic, and what you think of as their limits or possibilities.

CB: Sure. I guess I would say…I mean, I've done a lot of different things. I've been working with different forms of digital writing since the mid-90s—seems like a long time to me. So I've experimented with a lot of different things. I've been keeping a blog for almost ten years. I've experimented with what I think of as sort of more multimedia pieces. You know, I'm active on Facebook and Twitter and less active as a blogger than I used to be. You know, I've published in online journals. That probably is some total of the different types.

I don't think of any one type of digital writing as necessarily more academic than another. For me, obviously they have different functions. When I'm posting to Twitter, I'm not engaging in the same kind of argumentation that I am when I write a paragraph in an online essay, but I'm maybe connecting more directly with an audience there than I am

when I'm sitting in my office typing something that may not see the light of day for a year or longer. So I guess, maybe for me, the academic part of it is more in my sort of overall purposes and aims than it necessarily is in any one particular medium.

As far as limits, and/or possibilities, I think that there are…I mean, I think that a lot of the limits that we talk about with respect to social media—for example, the fact that you can't have extended careful discussions with nuance on Twitter, for example—I think those things are pretty obvious. I don't think that we've engaged with the possibilities as much as we hopefully will over the next five or ten years. I just think of the differences, for example, in the way that I read now versus five years ago in terms of how I find information. I mean, last summer I wrote on my blog about kind of redoing my whole scholarly mycology, about using different software and sort of the steps that I take from starring things on Twitter to saving them in Instapaper for later reading to tagging them in Diigo—you know, this whole sort of ecosystem of tools that I wasn't using five years ago. It's no longer just a matter of waiting for the journal to arrive in my mailbox, you know, scanning the table of contents and reading; it's a much more constant process now. And I think that one of the things that's left to do for our discipline and for scholarly communication in general is to think about how to write differently for that kind of ecology.

BK: Yeah. You mentioned that when you're posting on Twitter, it's something different than when you're writing in the computer, and that you know that this piece of work might not get published a year later or a couple years later. Does that change the types of topics that digital publishing can engage with? Does that seem like a major change to you, that you can write about something more immediate that's happening or tie that to your scholarship?

CB: To a certain degree, yeah. I mean, I think that, for example, there are more short form journals online now than there used to be. I'm thinking of, for example, *Present Tense* or *Hyper Pedagogy* or I think it's the *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* that feel like they address more…they sort of follow the contours of our conversations more closely than, say, a journal article or even a conference presentation. They tend to be more responsive to immediate circumstance. It's not necessarily a difference in kind, for me, as much as it's a difference in degree. The essay that I write that I send to a journal still is read by other people who are my audience before I send it out. I have conversations surrounding my work with other people even when I'm writing for print, but it feels a lot more immediate and a little bit more open and flexible when I'm doing it online.

One of the things that I've actually gotten used to in the last—I'm thinking I wrote…this past spring I wrote two chapters for edited collections, and in both cases I actually wrote them in Google Docs and shared the documents with the editors before I was finished, so that they could go in and start reading and giving me feedback that I could incorporate into the rest of the drafting, and to me that's a much more ongoing process. You know, I would much rather do that than spend all this time and effort, write the thing, send it out, six moths later get it back…comments, I've already forgotten sort of my thought

processes as I was writing. And I don't think I could have done that kind of sharing and that kind of open composing process…I would have been really uncomfortable doing that even like three or four years ago.

BK: In terms of the way your thoughts on digital writing have changed—you said that you started the blog ten years ago, the first version of it. What were some of your goals then when you set it up as you remember and some of the purposes then, and how has that changed?

CB: Back in the old days [*laughter*]—seems funny to talk about it that way, but it really was different. When I started blogging, there were probably only about maybe five or ten other people in the field who were doing it. And I don't say that to mean that I was first—because I wasn't—but it was very sparse, and over the next couple of years a lot of people took up blogging. It got to the point where there was 100 or 150 active blogs, and then it peaked in about year three or four and then started to trail off as micro-blogging—Facebook, Twitter—became more popular. To the point now where I use my blog mostly now as a place for doing more what I think is called medium-stakes publishing: longer pieces than I could comfortably fit in a Facebook update but not the length and development of a journal article or an essay. It's interesting—you're seeing now the development of tools—there's a tool called Medium, which is specifically for those kinds of middle-range publications. There are a couple different applications that allow you to post—I think one of them is Tweet Longer maybe?—that's in between the investment it takes to host a blog versus the bumper-sticker speed of Twitter, finding something for that middle ground. That's where my blog is now. It used to be a lot more every day, but my everyday stuff has shifted to Facebook and Twitter. Now it's more like once a week or a couple times a month.

AH: So kind of related to that, how does your website complement or supplement your other research, and how is your blog viewed by the Writing Program or the university in terms of scholarship?

CB: I actually included my blog in my tenure case, and again I think I was one of the earlier people to do that. I didn't include it, though, under one of the three primary categories. I gave it its own category, and I had won the field's weblog of the year award in 2005, so I had gotten some recognition for it. I had a fairly healthy amount of traffic through there. I cited those things. I included what I thought were some of my best and most relevant posts. It's writing, and it's not the same kind of writing as the writing that I do for journals and for edited collections, but for me it made sense to include it in the same way that you would include any kind of performance, and there are a lot of different kinds of performance categories that happen at a university. To me, that was another one of them.

I'm a writing professor, and that's one of the places that I write. That was part of the motivation initially for me was you become a better writer by writing. I think that you could say the same about focusing or specializing in technology. It doesn't make sense to me to talk about that stuff without actually doing it.

Cue music: "Namer" by High Places.

BK: What do you see as some of the most viable spaces for digital scholars in the future, and how would you like to see the field change around digital publishing?

CB: I think a lot about the entire scholarly communication ecosystem, and I guess I would say two things that I think I'd like to see us move toward. The first is alternative means of valuing [and] assessing the writing that we do. I think it's gone really…I think we've sort of backed ourselves into corners in the academy by relying on a model that privileges book publication and that works out of the idea of scarcity, whether it's impact factor. We're not responsible for the entire ecosystem. I think we treat it as naturalized in some ways. I was talking about altmetrics, which is the idea of developing new means of judging [and] valuing scholarship, and I was talking about that at a conference back in February. And there's this great line by a guy at Indiana—Jason Priem—who writes, "Today's journals are still the best scholarly communication possible using 17th century technology." I think that line's hilarious, and I also think that we haven't given enough energy over to thinking about what that possible system might look like using 21st century technology.

So even though I think there's really interesting things being done in online journals, the idea of publishing a set of ten things together as an issue relies on the idea of it being on paper and it being cost-efficient to collect them together and just send them out four times a year…which is fine if you're publishing a paper journal. There's no reason to hold to that model when it's online. Why not put out an essay every two weeks? Just simple questions like that. And that doesn't even get to the question of…the fact that we value these publications when we share them on Facebook, when we retweet, when we review them in blogs, when we teach them in our courses, when we include them on exam lists. We have so many more tools now for quantifying and sharing and identifying and recognizing our work that restricting value to the number of times that it appears in the bibliographies of certain print journals seems like such a limited way of assessing scholarly value.

So I think we've got a lot of work to do in that direction. I think I said that I had two points, and then I just sort of ran them together. [*laughter*] So I guess maybe the first point was actually sort of the whole scholarly ecosystem, and a piece of that would be my second point, which is the idea of altmetrics—of finding different ways to measure the stuff that we do and also expanding the definition of what we do.

AH: I'm also interested in the ways that digital publishing and digital writing affect the field in terms of practice, as well, and pedagogy. So, could there be a field of rhet/comp today without digital writing as a central part of its study and practice? And what does digital writing do to change the way we understand rhetoric? And how do these digital spaces help to achieve or expand the goals of teaching composition in universities?

CB: Gosh, there's a lot of questions embedded in there.

AH: There are. [*laughter*] Good luck.

CB: I know. The easiest answer to give is "no." We can't have rhet/comp programs now without digital writing. And I think you're seeing that in the newest programs that are coming up where some form of digital writing or technology is appearing more often, even in program titles. It's seen as much more of an integral part of a core curriculum than you would have seen five years ago or ten years ago. I think that's definitely the direction that things are going.

Part of me, though, wants to say that maybe…I don't know. It could go in a couple different directions. It could go with the idea that that's sort of another specialty—another core course. But I could also easily see it just spreading throughout all courses. So rather than being something that we study separately in courses, it's something that just happens in all of our courses. And honestly, that's the approach that I myself take. For the first seven or eight years that I was in the program here, I think I taught a grand total of one course that was actually about technology on a graduate level. But every course I taught was about technology in a sense. So when I taught…I guess it was about seven or eight years ago now that I taught that genre course in the summer. One of the things that I had my students do were citation maps, and they were using what visualization tools existed at the time on the web to do those projects. I did a distant reading version of our 611 course—the intro to composition studies—where all of the students were reading and tagging separate works. We were using class time to see where the overlaps were rather than reading the same piece or a single set of pieces. They were blogging all of their entries. We were aggregating them in Delicious, doing visualizations of stuff they were reading. I did something similar in 631—the rhetorics course that I taught. We did a five-week unit where each week for five weeks we read all the of the rhetoric journals for that particular year and tagged them and aggregated them—the idea being that we were trying to get a sense of what was happening in the five most recent years in rhetorical scholarship. Those are both examples of the kind of distant reading projects that are associated with the digital humanities now.

So the traditional model of the graduate course is that it's sort of an externalized version of the reading process that each of the graduate students then internalize and practice themselves throughout their career. I think of it as kind of Bakhtinian in the sense that the dialogue that happens in those classrooms is supposed to be the dialogue that happens in your head once you become acclimated and enculturated into academic reading. So if we're going to argue that reading and writing are changing outside of that classroom, it makes sense to me that the classroom itself has to change, too—that we can't treat the classroom as an island that's unaffected by these changes and discourse that are happening all around us.

For some people, that may just mean using Twitter in the classroom. I'm thinking a lot about…I'm teaching our Rhetoric, Composition, and Digital Humanities course next spring, and I've been thinking a lot about how to embed some of these practices in the classroom in ways that make it manageable for the students but also alert them to the different possibilities. So I'm thinking about having one student every week be

responsible for live-tweeting the course, having another person that week be responsible for just collecting resources and posting them to a Tumblr—just trying to sort of model the different pieces of my own ecology but not holding anyone responsible for all of them at once as a brand new thing but distributing it throughout the class. You know, just to try these different practices and see how they enhance or blow up the classroom.

BK: What advice do you have for burgeoning digital scholars and current rhetoricians interested in the digital humanities and also for general scholars in composition and rhetoric that want to make sure that they're involved in some of the changes that have happened in the field?

CB: Probably the best piece of advice is "don't be shy." So much of the digital humanities is happening online. You can get live streams of a lot of conference talks now. The keynotes for the digital humanities conference just happened at Nebraska this past week and the keynotes were streamed and everyone who went to that conference is on Twitter, so there was a lot of live tweeting of panels and stuff like that. Honestly, for the first time in the past couple of years, I've actually been sort of, definitely in quote marks, "attending" conferences online. And it's actually been kind of an interesting process. You know, you don't actually have to be there to get a lot of the value of those kinds of activities. But honestly, there's no one set of digital humanities programs where you have to be there to participate in those conversations. You know there are a lot of smart blogs, a lot of activity on Twitter, and so much of this conversation is honestly just waiting for people to participate.

And I say don't be shy because, if nothing else, the digital humanities is extremely collaborative. I think that that's one of the real challenges for people who have been trained in kind of the old fashioned, sort of lock yourself in the archives or you know close yourself off in the office for three years and write a book by yourself. The digital humanities is very assertive about the fact that the types of projects being generated are the result of lots of different people coming together and sharing their talents and their skills and their expertise together. So it's a very conversational sort of specialty. And I think it's still very much at a place where, I mean there's honestly, there's a small canon of texts, but there are a lot of different areas. I mean earlier I mentioned distance reading, which is associated with Franco Moretti and more recently with Matthew Jockers. But there's really interesting work being done in interface design, universal design, text encoding, sentiment analysis—a lot of different sort of subfields, a lot of different kinds of projects being done. My sense is that it's very open. And they try to pride themselves on their inclusivity and their willingness to help, so I don't think there's necessarily a high bar for entry. I think what it takes is just interest and sort of a willingness to pursue that interest.

AH: So there are lots of job postings for digital writing, new media, and digital humanities. What would you think of as the minimum requirements for someone applying to these jobs? What are departments looking for in terms of practical skills and a general knowledge base?

CB: That's an excellent question. And it's actually one that I've been thinking a lot about as we've been talking here at Syracuse about taking more initiative with respect to digital humanities. The short answer is that there is no one answer. There are debates about whether or not you should be able to program and if you were to say, "Okay yes, you should be able to program" then there are any number of different languages. There's a good book on digital humanities that just came out that has like five co-authors, and they actually make some concrete suggestions for what a curriculum might look like. And some of those things are working with data, from text encoding to metadata to visualization. Some familiarity with programming languages and how they work I think would be useful. Some awareness of the conversations that are happening, but really one of the things that I think they say, if I remember correctly, is that digital humanities is very project-based. And really the skills that might be required for one project might be completely different than the skills required for another project, and so I think it is more a matter of learning a very flexible, right-tools-for-the-right-job kind of thing. So it's more a matter of knowing *how* than knowing *what* necessarily. You know, I don't consider myself particularly expert at programming languages. I know a little bit about them, and you know I have my fair share of expertise when it comes to different platforms and software packages, but I also have people that I know who are more expert than I am and can help me figure out what I need to know. And I think that's more valuable than knowing the stuff myself sometimes.

When Derek Mueller and I were working on the CCC online archive, one of the things that we did was to use pearl scripts to process all of the articles and to generate word frequencies for one or two word nouns and noun phrases, and in order to do that we had to put together a set of pearl scripts and neither one of us knew how to do that, and so we ended up having to spend time online finding out who knew who to do that, tracking them down, getting their help, and once they did it was just a matter of running the scripts. It would have taken us a year to learn how to do it ourselves, so I mean that's where the collaboration part of it comes in. You know, accepting that I don't know that there's anyone that knows all this stuff. But finding the things that are going to be most important for you, and most important for the particular project that you want to work on and sort of building outward from there is probably the right strategy.

BK and AH: Thanks Collin.

CB: Sure, my pleasure.

Cue music: "Be Sweet" by Marco Trovatello.

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Allison Hitt and Ben Kuebrich with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.