

Nora McNamara

Professor H. Culik

ENGL 1190-C0607

4 July 1776

Purpose and Problem Statement

Purpose of the Course

The class web site summarizes some of the major goals of ENGL 1180:

This course teaches students how to understand information created by knowledgeable people who have already thought about a subject. Second, it teaches us how to read their work to spot the places where we can make a correction, add a new idea, or make things more thorough. Once we see where we can “add to the conversation,” we have the basis for a paper. This whole process can be summarized in a map metaphor: we map a topic, find the gaps in the map, and then re-draw the map to make it more complete. For each step of the map metaphor we have a tool: TEQ Sheets for the mapping; Purpose & Problem Statement for identifying gaps in the map, and the Prospectus for proposing a new map.

Beyond this, the course emphasizes critical reading and critical thinking. These are treated as skills that are necessary to produce what has been called “critical citizenship.”

The content of our papers requires another key term: “productive skepticism.”

Purpose of the Assignment

This assignment extends the work that we have already done for the paper that built on Jean Anyon's scholarship. There, we wrote about Anyon's research on the effect of class on the type of education we receive. The paper required lots of TEQ Sheets, and it seemed to force our attention on the TEQ Sheets, especially the "they say." We didn't spend that much time on the other tools like the Purpose & Problem Statement or the Prospectus.

This assignment seems to still require lots of TEQ Sheets, but the emphasis has shifted to the Purpose and Problem Statement and to the Prospectus. We've named topics for sections of the Zine that we will produce, but our big problem is to ask useful questions about our topic. That's the "problem" part of the P&P Statement. It seems to pressure us to ask especially good questions. Are we being forced to strengthen our "I say"? Is this some test to see if we can have an "I say" that is not just a crazy rant? That would make sense if we think about how this assignment is related to the purpose of the course, but we have to remember that the purpose of the assignment is to create a "we say" about something that could easily become just a rant.

Problem

I am perplexed by the valuable assistance that digital surveillance creates. For example, a less crazy version of the Knewton talk would illustrate how to identify skills that a student needs to help her understanding of a topic. Is the sacrifice of privacy for such help necessarily a bad thing? Can the profile for something like tutoring be kept separate

from other information? Is the real danger the ability of companies to put together all the data collected about you? Can an individual keep any control over how such information is used? This all seems urgent when I think more about education. Can my profile – academic, financial, behavioral, legal, medical – create a kind of “digital redlining” that restricts the things I learn about? Anyon describes class-based education, but I didn’t know that was going on because it was invisible to me; I didn’t know there were alternatives. Does digital redlining do the same thing? Macomb is starting to do the “Guided Pathways” program; is it a form of digital redlining based on my digital footprint.

594 Words

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Prospectus

Digital redlining re-invents redlining for a culture that has come to rely on complex algorithms for making choices based on the huge amounts of information stored in databases. Their information is queried in ways that depend on specific values and beliefs, but those values and beliefs are often unrecognized by the people who create the algorithms. Not only are the creators of the algorithms often unaware of the values and beliefs built into their black boxes, but also the people affected by the “outputs” of these boxes are unable to know how they work. The problem becomes even more complex when we realize that there are programs like Hadoop that integrate different databases and create masses of information that can be embedded with prejudice, ignorance, injustice, and inaccuracy. The threat of this new form of redlining is a serious one, and an example of how the assumptions of “data-driven” projects can illustrate what is at stake.

Currently, Macomb is entering a project called “Guided Pathways,” that attempts to have people graduate in fewer years with fewer “wasted” credits. This data-driven project provides an example of how class biases keep working class students from the variety of courses offered at elite schools. It tracks students, creates rigid pathways to follow, and leads students into narrowly scripted educational pathways. By keeping students unaware of other ideas about what “waste” means or about how the working

class is kept in its place by class consciousness, the program amounts to a kind of “digital redlining” that keeps us in our place, a “place” that is no longer geographic, but a fixed place in the class structure of America.

275 words