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Upvoting the audience: A Burkean analysis of Reddit

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Upvoting the Audience: A Burkean Analysis
of Reddit

(TITLE)

BY

Doug Urbaniski

THESIS

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Abstract

My thesis examines the Internet community Reddit through the rhetorical framework of Kenneth Burke, specifically his work with identification between individuals and how identification shapes communities. I focused on three sections of Reddit: World News, Ask Reddit, and Politics, and analyzed the best-voted comments of top posts from each section, focusing on how anonymous users communicate with one another and how their anonymity might influence the ways they interact. Additionally, I propose a method for instructors to use Reddit in the classroom, taking advantage of the medium's systematic anonymity.

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Chapter 1: Burke, Rhetoric, and Audience

The Internet and Kenneth Burke

The proliferation of online interactivity is inarguable. Students neurotically check Facebook on their smartphones or tablets, hoping to keep up to see who broke up with whom. Angry voters debate with one another on news websites, arguing how if teachers were armed, tragedies like Sandy Hook would have ended with minimal casualties. Common interests, whether they be the social life or political quagmires, are a magnetic point for these 3G wanderers, bringing them together. But is that all to be found in these groups? Philosopher and rhetorician Kenneth Burke would argue there is more going on.

Burke published *A Rhetoric of Motives* in 1950, five years after he published the companion book *A Grammar of Motives*, thirty years before two universities in North Carolina connected each other via computer servers in an early manifestation of the World Wide Web, and fifty five years before popular social news website Reddit went live. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke focuses significantly on the idea of “identification,” illustrated through this description: “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so” (20). Burke gives us two figures, A and B. They are two different and separate individuals but they, as those in the aforementioned communities, are connected through similar interests. “Identification,” as a process for Burke, is how strangers connect with one another. In connecting, these two become “substantially one” with one another, despite being two individuals.

Of course, in using the word “substance,” we fall into a gray area where Burke himself describes the word as an “abstruse philosophical term,” but admits that the functionality of the term still remains (21). Substance is important in Burke’s formulation of identification, as he goes further to note that “to identify A with B is to make A ‘consubstantial’ with B,” modifying the word “substance” to illustrate the link between two entities identified with one another (21). This link is highly valued by Burke, as he argues that “a doctrine of *consustantiality*, either explicit or implicit may be necessary to any way of life” (21). One cannot make it through this world without establishing some connection with another. Burke seems to argue that social interaction is a necessary function. To be consubstantial, individuals must “have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes” (21). While A and B may both be identified as both having brown hair, that does not quite make them consubstantial. If A and B are both opposed to the death penalty as a means of punishment or both believe that second amendment entitles them to an assortment of assault rifles, they are far more consubstantial than the A and B who happen to share similarly shaded hair.

But there must be more to the relationship between A and B. To suggest that what links them is simple aesthetic attributes or a shared set of values would be mere categorization. We must remember the titular focus of Burke’s book: rhetoric, which he defines as “the art of persuasion, or a study of the means of persuasion in any given situation,” paraphrasing Aristotle and Isocrates (46). As mentioned previously, A and B’s commonalities do not automatically grant them the status of consubstantiality. Identification and persuasion are intrinsically connected in the context of consubstantiality as “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language, by

speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (Burke 55). While there are several avenues by which we as communicating creatures can identify with one another with a goal of persuasion, there is only a finite number. One must tailor their method of communication to an audience via a common ground. As Burke points out, common language is absolutely necessary to persuade, though that does not strictly mean languages such as Spanish or English. A will have a much easier time persuading B to come to his side if they are both speaking Spanish, but “language” can have a broader definition as well. There is the old cliché in which a person shows approval of a statement or offer with the phrase “Now you’re talking my language,” and always the two parties are already speaking the same literal language.

A and B could also be having a simple conversation on their favorite sports. A, being American, has more of a fondness for baseball than B, who hails from Britain. B, on the other hand, is more partial to soccer (or “football,” as he calls it). A might describe the skill of his favorite players with various statistics such as the players’ batting averages or strikeouts. B may have some vague understanding of what A is describing in part because they speak the same literal language, but the information might not fully be grasped by B if he has never seen a baseball game. The reverse applies as well if B describes a recent football match to A, who might lack understanding for how impressively a football player might perform if he has never witnessed a proper football match. A and B do not quite speak the same language, though certain symbols might carry over between them such as “scores” and “referees.” They can Burke writes, “the use of symbols, by one symbol-using entity to induce action in another (persuasion properly addressed) is in essence not magical but *realistic*” (46).

While there certainly may be an Internet community dedicated to all things brown-haired (one should never underestimate the Internet's propensity to fixate on the most inane of things), that which links them may be too arbitrary to be truly consubstantial. Burke writes that identifying A with B makes them consubstantial, yet there is an implication that the ultimate consubstantiality must look beyond the aesthetic and superficial to the philosophical and idealistic. A community of brown-haired people can be more consubstantial if it is a community of brown-haired Republicans or brown-haired Episcopalians. It is this consubstantiality that makes two people truly identified with one another.

Now that there is a process of identification and a value ascribed to it, what is "identity"? We know nothing about A and B save they are male since he refers to both with the pronoun "he." Identity, according to Burke, is "the thing's . . . uniqueness as an entity in itself and by itself, a demarcated unit having its own particular structure" (21). From Burke's description, readers might gather that "identity" is indeed connected to an individual but is also separate from it. A person is not his identity, nor is his identity that person. Rather, the identity is that which sets him apart from another. As he puts it, "identification is compensatory to division" (23). Without division, "there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity," and "absolute communication" would no longer be something to aspire to but something already in practice. Here, Burke is not simply defending his own profession, but rather pointing out that this division is possible and should be what people aim for rather than hope for a unrealistic shift in which "absolute communication would be of man's very essence" (23). Internet communities mark the largest separations in the online population, with smaller subcommunities

developing on individual websites. Though the universality of the Internet unifies a large portion of the human population, human nature drives individuals to separate themselves into groups, drawn to those with similar interests and ideals.

With the identification between A and B, there is an implied division, separating A and B from other entities as well as separating A and B from each other. According to Burke, “to begin with ‘identification is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*” (23). The very act of identification separates and categorizes individuals. In keeping with our examination of A and B, they are people of interest, already separated from the twenty four other possible people referred to with a single letter. While it’s likely that Burke chose A and B as simple analogies, why did he pick A and B as opposed to Y and a Z? Overanalyzing Burke’s reasons for choosing the letters that he did may prove less than beneficial, but in picking those two specific letters he does do the very thing that identification does: categorizes and classifies. Their identities right now are “A” and “B,” and so far they are identified as such because they both stand at the front of the alphabet.

Rhetoric and the Internet Community

As he uses the simple model of individuals A and B to illustrate identification, we can easily apply Burke’s rhetorical ideas to Internet users. Though people do not physically interact with one another, the Internet has provided a medium by which users can use language to communicate with one another, whether it be through text or image. Two of the most popular Internet communities today are 4chan and Reddit. Both get their share of publicity: hacktivist organization Anonymous takes its title from the absence of usernames on 4chan’s image boards, and Reddit received flak for one of its previous

controversial communities, r/jailbait, that posted non-pornographic images of underage girls (Chen). They are not by any means identical as their programming changes the way the community shares and discusses content. 4chan's content is more temporal as after a certain amount of time older threads are deleted to make room for new threads. The activity remains lively, so the oldest content hosted on 4chan is rarely any older than twenty-four hours. Reddit, on the other hand, is more permanent as older threads are not deleted. Sometimes comments or other content is deleted due to a moderator finding the content inappropriate according to the rules of the community or the user himself is unsatisfied with his post.

Online communities differentiate from one another, as well as the users of those communities. For example, 4chan and Reddit are different in that 4chan is intended as an image board where people post picture files and discuss them. Reddit certainly allows for the posting of images, but links to articles or videos are also posted. The lack of usernames on 4chan sets itself apart from Reddit as well, as most of those who post on 4chan forego the use of username and instead don the moniker "Anonymous." One is not required to create an account on 4chan in order to interact with others. On Reddit, however, one must create an account if one intends to post links or distribute upvotes and downvotes. A Reddit user without an identity can still access links and read comment threads, but is at that point little more than an observer. On 4chan, is perhaps harder to maintain an individual identity unless one decides to use a username, but it poses no impediment to interacting with other 4chan users. Reddit, however, requires a user to create an identity if they hope to interact with others.

According to research conducted by Google's Ad Planner in 2012, Reddit appears mostly comprised of male users with male Redditors comprising just under 65% of the user base (Pingdom). Nearly 30% of Redditors fall into the age range of 18 to 24 years old, placing them in a group of high school graduates and college students. While the age groups of 25 to 34 and 45 to 44 each come into second compared to the 18 to 24 group, the latter makes up the largest single group (Pingdom). It can be concluded that nearly a third of Reddit's readership consists of mostly male college-aged individuals, but either descriptor does not necessarily describe the dominant group.

Reddit's format complicates the interaction between these users in that the system of upvotes and downvotes can influence heavily what is seen by users. Some comments are downvoted to the point where the comment's karma score drops "below threshold," causing that comment and its subsequent replies to be hidden (though not inaccessible). One might argue that the voting system itself is an extension of the comments system in that if someone submits a comment that the community appreciates or disapproves of, they do not have to express it in words. A simple click of an upward pointing arrow will designate if a user found a comment enlightening, amusing, or both, while a click of the downward pointing arrow will convey disappointment or offense towards a particular comment. Higher-rated comments move towards the top of the page, making them the first thing new visitors will see. This particular aspect of the system might be problematic in that a comment that several find funny might eclipse a post that several others found poignant and valuable to discussion. Then again, those strongly attached to or engaged by the subject of discussion would likely proceed and read other comments as opposed to reading the first comment.

Regardless, the voting system establishes a divide as to what is popular among the users of the community and what is not. A post of a Richard Dawkins interview about the holes in the logic behind intelligent design might earn a high amount of upvotes in r/atheism, one of the more popular Subreddits. The interview's appearance on the front page of Reddit could make a couple of implications: that the majority of the community feels that the post is a worthwhile read for anyone or that the same majority merely agrees with the idea. The issuing of the upvote or downvote is, in itself, an act of persuasion. By giving an upvote to the Dawkins interview, a user is not necessarily trying to convince the audience that the idea presented in the interview is true and universal (though it may be a sentiment they agree with), but rather that other Redditors should read this article. The user does not have a specific user in mind, so their audience is much broader than the persuasive interaction between A and B which is a one-on-one relationship. B knows his audience much more clearly than a Reddit user knows theirs, but examining the front page on Reddit would likely help to gauge what interests the average Reddit user and provide him or her with an idea of what common ground they can establish with the community.

It is important to reiterate that Reddit requires users to create an account if they desire to interact with the community. One cannot upvote or downvote comments or submit comments of their own without a username. The username can be whatever a user desires assuming that it is not already taken and can be as revealing or as masking as they like. One can make a username based solely on their real name, or one can create a temporary "throwaway" account if they want to discuss a matter without exposure. The account creation process for Reddit is quick and simple and requires nothing more than a

username and a password. Reddit does not ask for any personal information and gives the option of submitting one's email address should they want to change their password later. This simplification of account making guarantees a user's anonymity as long as they are not candid with personal details with others on the Internet.

A fan of the Smiths might find refuge in the username "smithsfan2013" and find it easier to discuss his bipolar episodes than she would if she revealed her real name in her username. The username becomes the identity that Burke would claim is her "uniqueness as an entity in [her]self and by [her]self" (21). The username still allows her to express her appreciation of the Smiths and identify with others who also enjoy the Smiths. Her comments, however, take it a step further and allow her to identify with others who might also enjoy the Smiths but also experience the same bipolar disorder issues. Consubstantiality grows between these like minded users.

Despite the cover of a username and lack of an exposed identity, users still identify with one another and establish a sense of community. Is the use of a mask what allows such identification to happen? Or is the mask little more than a comfort measure? In my research, I will observe the interactions of Reddit users in certain communities and see how they identify and find consubstantiality and overcome the division imposed with one another through rhetorical analysis using Kenneth Burke's work in *A Rhetoric of Motives* as a lens. Judging from the interactions of these Internet users, might there be a way that such a system could be used in the classroom? Other questions include:

- Could an extra layer of security change the interaction of students?
- What possible opportunities and complications might a karma-like system provide?

- Could anonymity in the classroom benefit the students by allowing them to create a comfortable space in which they can create a community in which they can express themselves without fear of persecution and rebuke?

I aim to explore the pedagogical value of a community hosted on Reddit or designed to be Reddit-like in the classroom setting.

In the following chapter, I will focus on how the Internet has established itself as a space where individuals can manipulate their identities for varying reasons, whether for the purpose of protecting one's own identity, creating a new and alternative identity, or promoting one's identity for fame.

Chapter 2: Identity Online

The Digital Mask

The Internet has opened up the forum for discussion to an instantaneous and international level, allowing for billions to interact with one another through various media of communication. At first, communication was limited to text and perhaps low-resolution images and video. Now with improvements to Internet connections computer hardware, one can initiate a video chat with a person on the opposite side of the world.

For many, advances like video chat and the like are not a priority unless the person on the other side is a close friend or family member. Many users embrace the ability to interact with other people on the Internet, but only want so much to be known about themselves. Despite the advances in technology, many still resort to the simple text-based message boards to communicate with others.

Just as on Reddit, many websites require the use of a username and password depending on what services they provide. Email accounts are obvious candidates for this method of security so as to provide privacy for those who use the service. Online video games require usernames so as to not only differentiate players from each other but also to store unique data to a given player such as progress in a game that a certain character has. Message boards and forums also require usernames so that, again, users can be differentiated.

Each time a person creates a username, they have the opportunity to create a separate persona. The username's creation is often influenced by what it is being made for. A online fantasy role-playing game might influence a user to create a username inspired by a character from an old fantasy novel. A forum for a fantasy baseball league

might push a user to create a username either inspired by baseball terminology or that user's favorite team. While certain parameters might be set as far as character restrictions or appropriateness, a user has the freedom to create whatever username they want as long as it has not already been taken by another.

Often, additional information is required for account creation such as the user's real name and date of birth, and, depending on the service, a mailing address and phone number. Websites like Facebook and Twitter require such additional information, though if users so wish they can mask their own identities through privacy settings or falsifying their information. These websites all require some sort of account if one wishes to utilize their services, whether it be posting on Reddit or receiving email with Gmail.

There are also the numerous websites that do not require an account to use their services, most commonly popular news websites like *The Huffington Post* or *Yahoo News*. Even Reddit does not require an account to access links or read threads, only to be able to post and interact with the community as well as tailor one's subscriptions to their liking. The imageboard 4chan most famously does not require a username to post and interact with other users, and it is apparent that the community has embraced the de facto username issued to those who do not enter a username and password: "Anonymous," a community that Quinn Norton argues is "a culture" (Norton).

The username exists as an identity that represents the user who created it. For many websites, a username is used as a mask to preserve one's anonymity from undesirable attention. Those who do not want their true name, gender, or age known online can easily mask it with a vague username that contains no personal information. Some websites allow this through the freedom to create whatever screenname a user

desires. A website like 4chan gives users its anonymity by default. Regardless of the website's theme--aside from social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter--anonymity is not only embraced, but it is expected. It is difficult to see most online communities as anything aside from a gathering of masked individuals.

Why the Mask?

The purpose of a mask, both physical and digital, is to protect one's identity, but from whom? In the masquerade parties of old, partygoers could wear the mask and behave as they liked, whether they viewed their actions and behavior as an extension of their true selves or if they felt the need to put on the persona of another person. With the protection of the mask, their actions would not likely be associated with their true identities. The philosophy remains the same on the Internet: what one posts online under the guise of a username as a digital mask will not be associated with the person wearing said mask. The reasons are far more numerous and complicated than what I presented in the outdated masquerade scenario, but the basic premise remains the same. Some users enjoy the anonymity as they find they can fling whatever insult they wish at others on the Internet without real word repercussions. Others find the anonymity to be necessary when seeking help for mental or physical health issues on various forums and online support groups so as not to pull unwanted attention their way.

At first glance, the idea of users hiding themselves with usernames might sound antithetical to Burke's idea of identification and finding consubstantiality with other users. Consubstantiality sounds like a concept only achievable when A and B know each other's true identities, but in truth the anonymity does not interfere with A and B achieving it. If A and B both have usernames to keep their real names from appearing on

whatever Internet community they belong to, their shared anonymity in itself is a symbol they use to identify with one another. The anonymity itself *allows* for consubstantiality with not just a single user but online audience as a whole. A community like Reddit is a community of anonymous users in that their identities are covered with a username. A Redditor's audience is just as anonymous as they are.

For the karma-minded Redditor, it is important to consider audience, but how one does that is dependent on how immersed in the Reddit culture that user is. A Redditor must have some familiarity with the popular opinions and memes as far as which ones will net the most karma for a user. Both upvotes and downvotes are a positive for a user in that it is a confirmation that another user has seen the post. As Tracy A Zimmerman notes in her article "Authors, Audiences, and the Gaps Between," "new media merely ensures that there are always people 'out there' watching, reading, writing, copying, and stalking the presence you have created online. 'Among' this kind of audience, there is a distinct blur between what is collaborative and cautionary, between what is intended and unwanted" (84). While the "stalking" Zimmerman refers to is not facilitated by Reddit's lack of a "friend" or "follower" system, Reddit as a new medium promises that at least someone will see a given post, and if they deem it worthy of an upvote, others will hopefully see it too.

A successful Redditor must also be mindful of what Subreddit they are posting to as certain Subreddits are created for specific interests. For example, a post on r/gaming that touts the wonders of a particular new board game might be downvoted or altogether deleted by a moderator for not being about *video* gaming. A user who posts about a board game on r/gaming is completely ignorant or confused about the purpose of r/gaming and

is thus unaware of the audience they are posting for. Some users might downvote the post for not being relevant to the discussion, which is permitted according to Reddiquette as long as those users are citing the reasons for their downvotes in the comments section.

According to Erin Karper in her "Theorizing Audience Awareness In Web-Based Self Presentation," there are three common beliefs when it comes to the way people interact on the Internet: "When they're online, people don't think about audience"; "people who post stuff online assume that people from real life can't find it"; and "if people would just be aware of who could be seeing what they put online, there wouldn't be so much trouble" (Karper). Much of Karper's work deals more the realm of social networking, specifically of an education student who was denied a degree because of a Facebook post involving her drinking from a cup with a caption that said, "Drunken pirate." Still, the attitudes are mostly universal for most Internet users. Though the idea of prospective employers searching for users' Facebook profiles to ensure applicants are upstanding citizens still gives cause for alarm for some, the second assumption seems to be widespread judging from the abrasive interactions of users. Their mindset appears to be that there are no serious repercussions from what they say on the Internet. The problematic common belief that Karper posits, however, is that "people don't think about audience" (Karper). Rhetorically speaking, this cannot be wholly accurate as users must be mindful--whether consciously or subconsciously--of their audience for any sort of interaction to occur.

Though Burke writes of rhetoric and persuasion, the importance and influence of audience is evident: "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language, by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his"

(Burke 55). Even if an Internet user makes an intentionally offensive comment, the user must be aware of the audience and what will offend them. An individual from outside the United States might not be aware of how insulting an image of a person displaying his middle finger might be in other countries. A culture—especially an Internet culture like 4chan or Reddit—has not only a written or spoken language to unify its people but also a set of symbols that Burke would argue *is* a significant part of the language. Even the act of insulting a person on the Internet can be seen as an act of identifying with that user insofar as using “his language.”

Karper goes on to quote Lenhart: “Many bloggers feel relatively confident in their online anonymity, reasoning that connecting their offline selves to their online selves would be a more difficult process than the average person would undertake, and that the large number of other weblogs and personal websites makes it unlikely that theirs will be found by people they hope do not see it” (qtd. in Karper). Though the quotation deals more with blogging community, the sentiment remains applicable to other communities outside the so-called “blogosphere.” There is a marked separation between the offline self and the online self. This is not to say that the two selves are two complete separate personas, but there is a difference in how one presents him or herself on the Internet and how one might present him or herself in real life. The confidence in online anonymity is not exclusive to bloggers.

The purpose of a mask is to hide identity, but could it perhaps have another use? Anyone who sits down and reads threads on 4chan or goes through the comments section on YouTube is bound to stumble on something candid and likely offensive. Are these words or phrases that pervade these users’ everyday vocabularies? Or do they feel a

certain comfort wearing their masks of anonymity that leads them to say these things? Could it be possible to use the candidness of masked strangers in a beneficial way? Those who frequent these websites might be quiet in at school or at work, but find a voice online, whether it be an offensive voice or a polite voice.

Digital Unmasking in Social Networking

While most of the Internet embraces the idea of anonymity and privacy, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter treat it in a different manner altogether. Ordinarily, a user creates a Facebook or Twitter account not so they can connect with others under the guise of a username, but so they can either connect to friends and relatives or establish new relationships. The Facebook profile in itself is set up so users can reveal anything they want to about themselves to others through photo albums, lists of interests, and other pieces of personal information. Users can, of course, set their profile to private so those who are not friends with them on Facebook cannot access such information or images. Curiously, it shares some similarities to Reddit in that one can “like” a comment or status much in the way a user can upvote or downvote a submission or comment on Reddit. One might argue, however, that the Facebook “like” is more of a replacement comment in which a single click expresses approval and there is no expectation for the user to justify their “like,” whereas in the Reddit community, it is preferred that a user expresses why they gave a particular post an upvote.

Twitter is something of a different story. Users can still make their Twitter accounts private as they can on Facebook, but Twitter accounts are often used by celebrities and public figures as tools by which they can promote themselves and connect with their admirers. The idea behind Twitter is that celebrity Twitter users are the ones

“tweeting” themselves, not public relations assistant or a manager. Those who are not famous can then reach out to their favorite celebrities and even interact with them if a celebrity so wishes to. There are no “friends” on Twitter, however, unlike Facebook. Instead, users “follow” others, almost implying that popular Twitter users have a position of power in that they have “followers.” Accumulating a numerical wealth on Reddit is not the same as it is on Twitter and Facebook as a user does not befriend another user in a way that it shows up on their profiles. User profiles only display karma scores for users, showing how many of their links or comments were popular with other Redditors.

Reddit is not strictly a social networking website, so it does not have a way to friend or follow users without a paid account status such as Reddit Gold or browser plugin or program that automatically keeps track of posts by a given user. One might argue that the purpose of Reddit is not to make friends in the superficial sense that one might make friends on Facebook or Twitter, but rather to connect users based on shared interests through themed Subreddits.

Comfort in the Mask

To wear a mask is to hide one’s face and protect his identity, but to what end? For some, using the digital mask is nothing more to protect their identities from unwanted attention. For others, it is to protect themselves while they seek help for personal problems. Online support groups employ the same measures to ensure anonymity as other Internet services in arguably more effective ways. In “Legitimacy, Authority, and Community in Electronic Support Groups,” Jolene Galegher, Lee Sproull, and Sara Kiesler explored some support newsgroups, especially ones that deal with suicide contemplation like alt.support.depression. According to the authors,

alt.support.depression “is read by more than 20,000 people,” a number likely unchanged since the study’s publishing in 1998. 20,000 is a significant number for tiny community like a support group, especially when one considers that that very number can comprise a small city (Galegher, Sproull, Kiesler 494). The Internet’s omnipresence makes high populations of users possible, especially in a time where high speed internet is not only common but practically free due to accessibility at small businesses and libraries.

Websites like Reddit see this sort of traffic nearly a hundred times over just on its r/Music Subreddit, nearly fifteen years after Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler examined alt.support.depression. The authors did not limit their focus to online support groups as they expanded their research to reviewing. They note that their “findings reveal that although the hobby groups and support groups confront similar rhetorical exigencies, differences in the focus of the two sets of groups are associated with noteworthy differences in patterns of discourse within the groups” (495). Given the difference in tone between the two groups, it is understandable that the very subject of discussion should influence the way in which the groups interact.

The comparatively miniscule scale of these support groups as well as the “social pressure make these groups less private, less anonymous, and more conformist than are electronic support groups” (497). In these relatively orthodox support groups, identity--at least one that can readily be attached to one’s face--is a major hindrance. Spending time in a group that meets on a regular basis allows for others to not only learn one another’s problems and insecurities but slowly associate those aspects with a specific face. The potential for embarrassment or shame outside of the group should two individuals meet in the group grows exponentially. Neither likely has ill will for the other, but seeing a

person that one is used to seeing in the safety of confidence outside that circle of trust may cause one to stumble on the path to healing. These issues are practically nonexistent on an online support group. Users only have to surrender as much detail as they deem appropriate for the support process. The lack of face-to-face confrontation makes the support process easier in that other users not have to know not only the support seeker's name but also their face, as "electronic groups offer the possibility of encountering people of any age or social category, of learning about many different perspectives on a given problem, of finding people with similar problems, and at the same time, of communicating in comparative privacy and psychological safety" (498). Users may be more candid in revealing their issues to the group without eyes on them, not quite in the spotlight like they might be in a support group when it is their turns to speak.

Users do not even have to participate fully, as they might read similar issues that another user might have and see the same help they get. These "readers, or lurkers, can participate without revealing anything about themselves, including presence, to other participants," unlike support groups where involvement is strongly encouraged and, in some cases, mandatory (497). The Internet is able to offer a degree of anonymity and security that cannot be found in a support group that relies so heavily on the physical and social elements being integrated. While the emotional unity and camaraderie that might be found in the physical support group might be harder to achieve in the online support group, the fact that 20,000 individuals are available for interaction as opposed to the ten or so in the physical support group makes the possibility of more strongly identifying with others and achieving a level of consubstantiality.

As Galegher, Sproull, and Kiesler put it, “electronic groups are open for business 24 hours a day” (497). Unlike the periodic support group that only meets so often, whether it be every week or month, the online support group constantly runs. Sure, it may have its peak hours when the most amount of people are awake seeking support, but the nature of the Internet allows for constant accessibility. So long as they can connect to the Internet, that person can attain some sort of support. The potential for identification and consubstantiation with others is increased in that a user is not limited to a certain time they can access the support group. In a traditional support group, a support seeker will no doubt participate in their group only so many times a month. Assuming they have a persistent Internet connection, the user effectively has no timeframe they are limited to for participating in an online support group.

In these online support groups, it is unlikely that the username is intended to bring out an alternate persona for the user. Those seeking help in these groups do not do so for a fictive personality; they are looking for support for themselves or offering support to others who truly need it. One might argue that they are in fact revealing a truer self to those in the support group than the self they present to those in the offline world. They are confident in their anonymity that they do not believe that a friend or acquaintance in the real world would be able to stumble upon the support group and identify the user from text alone.

The Masquerade of Redditors

Being an Internet community, Reddit features countless digital masks. Mask making through account creation on Reddit is a simple task requiring only the basics: a username and a password. One can elect to include their email address as well should

they want to recover their account later, but it is explicitly labeled “(optional)” (Reddit). There is no rule of decency as far as usernames go on Reddit, so it is not uncommon to come across childish and possibly offensive usernames on the site. Some users may use their real names as their usernames, while others simply take on a made up moniker. Many users choose the latter option as it provides them simultaneously with a degree of anonymity and an avenue of expression. Some even go as far as to create temporary “throwaway” accounts so as to discuss subjects in secret to avoid any embarrassment attached to their regular accounts. These accounts often explicitly label themselves as “throwaway” in the username.

Indeed, the idea of anonymity seems embraced in the Redditor culture. Reddiquette asks that users “Please don’t . . . post someone’s personal information,” regardless of whatever misconduct they are guilty of (“Reddiquette”). If a user is found putting another person’s information up on Reddit, they can be punished with “immediate account deletion” (“Reddiquette”). The AskReddit Subreddit explicitly bars the posting of personal information in its community, regardless if the poster’s information reveals anything about themselves or a fellow user, and any action that breaks this rule is responded immediately with a ban (“Ask Reddit”). While the ease of account creation might mitigate the threat of account banning from a specific Subreddit or complete account deletion, the karma system in place on Reddit adds another value to one’s account. Though a high karma score offers little more than bragging rights, users may still feel a certain attachment to their karma score.

There is something to be said about the ease of account creation. Any given user can go by multiple monikers on Reddit, giving them multiple possibilities for a new

identity. Those who create novelty accounts are the most likely to embrace this ideology, and often they will earn karma just by performing the duties that their novelty account name suggests. Such karma gathering seems to suggest that users privilege humor to the serious nature of discourse, but it is hard to say.

In Chapter 3, I will detail the results of my Reddit observations and detail what Burkean themes run throughout the user comments and how karma scores serves as an additional outlet for users to achieve consubstantiality.

Chapter 3: Reddit in Action

Redditing for the Non-Redditor

When one first arrives on Reddit, they might find the front page equally unnavigable and intimidating. Links to cat images hosted on Imgur, upcoming movie trailers, political discussion boards, or various Internet-central anomalies present an imposing wall to the uninitiated. At first glance, the collection of links might appear chaotic, but soon it becomes apparent that the front page is an amalgamation of several posts from various Subreddits. Only content from the Subreddits a user is subscribed to appears on the front page, unless they do not log in or change their subscriptions. By default, users are subscribed to “adviceanimals,” “announcements,” “askreddit,” “atheism,” “aww,” “bestof,” “blog,” “funny,” “gaming,” “iama,” “movies,” “music,” “pics,” “politics,” “science,” “technology,” “todayilearned,” “videos,” “worldnews,” and “wtf” (Reddit). The content of most of these Subreddits are fairly self-explanatory. Possible exceptions may be “adviceanimals,” in which photographs--at one time involving animals--are posted with amusing captions. Due to the repeated use of certain images and a running theme among the captions attached to these photographs, the images are commonly referred to as “memes.” Another Subreddit that might not be clear based on its name is “iama,” sometimes stylized as “IAmA” and short for “I am a . . . ask me anything” in which a celebrity or otherwise noteworthy person answers the most popular questions.

These are but a fraction of the Subreddits one can visit. Some, like r/askreddit, is limited to “self posts,” those posted with no link and intended for discussion. For most Subreddits, however, their lifeblood seems to consist of links to articles, videos, images,

etc. That does not mean, however, that discussion is not present on linked posts. Every post, whether a self post or a linked post, contains a comments section in which users can comment on and discuss the link in question. Users are then able to reply to comments and comments and replies alike can receive upvotes and downvotes, meaning that a reply that offers nothing to the conversation or is perceived as an undeserved insult by the community can be downvoted. Those replies and comments that receive too many downvotes are then hidden from view, not unlike downvoted links on the front page. Users can sort the comments according to their karma scores by “best,” “top,” “new,” “hot,” “controversial,” and “old.” “Best” is the default sorting procedure, created so “good comments will jump quickly to the top and stay there, and bad comments will hover near the bottom” (Munroe).

It is important to note that, while individual Subreddits have their own rules, there is an expected level of etiquette demanded of users, cleverly called “reddiquette.” As defined by Reddit, “Reddiquette is an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves. Please abide by it the best you can” (Reddiquette). These rules are not necessarily meant to be grounds for banning users or deleting posts, but more as a way to remain respectful towards one another on the website. While some rules of reddiquette might reflect the rules of certain Subreddits with regards to posting duplicates and “engag[ing] in illegal activity,” it is meant more as a guideline of courtesy. It is divided into two categories: “Please do” and “Please don’t,” with the latter being divided into further subcategories. One of these subcategories is “in regard to comments,” providing six guidelines for commenters to follow:

- [Do not] Make comments that lack content.

- [Do not] Announce your vote (with rare exceptions).
- [Do not] Complain about other users reposting/rehosting stories, images, videos, or any other content.
- [Do not] Complain about the votes you do or do not receive, especially by making a submission voicing your complaint.
- [Do not] Complain about reposts.
- [Do not] Complain about cross posts. (Reddiquette)

The latter four recommendations share the theme of “thou shalt not complain,” which is strongly tied to the first “Please do” of reddiquette: “Remember the human” (Reddiquette).

Methodology

For the purpose of analysis, I chose three of the popular default Subreddits: r/AskReddit, r/politics, and r/worldnews. Only three were chosen because a single Subreddit can provide a rich set of information, and using three would show trends as a single submission can receive over a thousand responsive comments. I examined these Subreddits over the course of three days around noon, in part to see if any posts remained at the top of the list, but also for the sake of brevity as the data collected over each day proved weighty. I checked them about midday when activity in the western hemisphere might have been highest when users may have been reading Reddit on lunch breaks. I recorded links for each comments section and later looked at the top five comments according to the default “Best” sorting. It is my hope that the sorting will account for the top comments in terms of what members of the community felt reflected the spirit of the post. r/AskReddit was chosen as it may be the most popular Subreddit intended for pure

discussion. Links are rarely posted on r/AskReddit, as per its number one rule: “You must post a clear and direct question, and only the question, in your title . . . Your own answer to the question should go in the comments as a reply to your own post” (Ask Reddit). Of the three, r/AskReddit has the most rules with ten and moderators with thirty-three, likely due to the nature of it being a strictly discussion page. Additionally, r/AskReddit has the most subscribers of the three chosen with “3,203,793 AskRedditors” (Ask Reddit).

I selected r/politics as it was a Subreddit where links would be posted but commentary would be strong. Self-posts for strictly discussion are allowed on r/politics, but only on Saturdays. My research did not fall on a Sunday, so the coverage of the Subreddit will be limited to comment pages on specific links. r/politics has the fewest amount of subscribers among the three I chose, but that is not to say they have a weak subscription base as they have “2,656,081 readers” (Politics). It does, however, have the second highest amount of rules (nine) and moderators (twenty four), meaning that the Subreddit is intended be well maintained.

r/worldnews was selected for the same reasons as r/politics in that it would be focused heavily on linked posts but offer up several comments. It has the second highest amount of subscribers over r/politics with 3,056,437 (World News), but has the fewest amount of rules and moderators with only four rules and fourteen moderators.

The variety of the three selected Subreddits was a conscious decision in that it was important to illustrate the variety of the online community itself. Hobbies and interests of all sorts likely have a Subreddit dedicated to them, and the versatility of the website itself gives readers an idea of the rhetorical and pedagogical value of Reddit.

The Rhetoric of Reddit

The results provided here come from the first day of observation, which provided a rich illustration of Reddit's populous. Humor seems to be the primary language of Redditors, whether it is through questions they asked, comments they made, or their usernames themselves. A novelty account shows just how much humor is appreciated by Redditors. In the first section, I will show the strongest examples of shared jokes between users. Despite the value Redditors hold towards joking, serious discourse is still pursued by most users. For some, opening up to one's fellow Redditors is seen as a brave act deserving of upvotes and rewards with monetary value. Oddly enough, the original posters of all of these posts do not respond to their commenters, with the notable exception of one user in the r/AskReddit Subreddit. The second section will showcase the posts in which serious discourse is adhered to by users. For the most part, Reddiquette is followed closely, with few issues arising between users. In the third section, I will highlight moments where Redditors stuck to the Reddiquette through examples of self-editing.

A Motive of Humor

Redditors have a proclivity towards joke making, regardless of the Subreddit one might look at. The Subreddit r/AskReddit hosts a shining example of Redditor humor in a discussion thread asking what weaknesses South Korea had in its defensive capabilities. User Not_Best_Korea asks, "South Koreans of Reddit, what would you say the weakest points of your military defense are?" At the time of recording, the post had received 5310 upvotes and 3494 downvotes, giving it a karma score of 1825. The question received 2487 comments, many of which consisted of humorous responses to the tongue-in-cheek question. It is clear that most users were "in on the joke," or at least picked up the

satirical tone to the question, though there were users who misunderstood some of the joke comments. Ssgtsnake's comment, "The fact that our mines along the DMZ deactivate if you yell, 'MINES, DEACTIVATE!' as you charge across the DMZ" (410 upvotes; 72 downvotes; 338 karma) had a response from boom_headshot1 that joked, "but only if you yell it in South Korean. It won't work if you say it in North Korean" ("South Koreans"). Several users responded to boom_headshot1's comment to note that there would not be different languages but likely different dialects. Most of the users did not receive much flack for the common response, but one user named ninj4z ended up with a karma score of negative thirteen points. The top five were all ironic answers, but only one of them was actually responded to by the original poster. In response to JollyRancherSquad's answer, "We are very vulnerable to a cavalry charge in broad daylight," (6533 upvotes; 3747 downvotes; 2786 karma), Not_Best_Korea responded with "Sank you! Much appriciarated!" so written as to emulate the accent of a foreign speaker ("South Koreans").

It is likely that Not_Best_Korea's account was intended as a novelty account like what is so often seen on Reddit's website. According to the user's profile, Not_Best_Korea only has five total posts, two of which are self-posts to r/AskReddit including the post in question and the other three are comments in that same thread. The comments appear to be consistent with the broken English of their response to JollyRancherSquad's comment. The other self-post, entitled "South Koreans of Reddit, what happend to your banking and network servers?" was posted eight days after the first and also seems to be in line with this character, but received no comments or downvotes, leaving with a default karma score of 1.

Not_Best_Korea's post provides a notable example of the novelty account in action on Reddit. Novelty accounts are notable part of Reddit, such as creative ones like ICanLegoThat who builds Lego creations inspired by other Redditors' comments (Collier) or silly accounts that set up a joke like guywhosaysTHIS ("NOVELTY ACCOUNTS ASSEMBLE!"). Novelty account users are most obviously putting on a persona, using a medium of humor to identify with other users of Reddit. Due to the high population of novelty accounts, it is apparent that users appreciate the humor or creativity of fellow users. Novelty accounts are rarely self-posters or link posters, as most of the fodder for their jokes comes from comments themselves. While Not_Best_Korea's account was likely intended to get more use out of it, the community was not as receptive to the question as it was to the user's first question. A possible reason may be due to the timeliness of the second post. The question regarding the banking and network computers refers explicitly to the news that North Korean hackers had hacked South Korean banks and television networks ("South Korean banks"). While the story got decent coverage, it is possible many users likely did not see it, whereas the first question makes reference only to the tensions between South Korea and North Korea. Luck is also a likely factor in the lack of response to Not_Best_Korea's second post, as it was likely buried by other posts that caught the eye of the r/AskReddit population.

User flamingeyebrows posted a story to r/worldnews about tensions between North Korea and the United States reported by *The Korea Herald*. Three of the five best comments are joke responses: dallen13's "China, please control your child" (944 upvotes; 168 downvotes; 776 karma), Thydamine's mock quotes from an unstable person implied to represent North Korea (1753 upvotes; 345 downvotes; 1408 karma), and

braclow's "North Korea vs The United States would be the equivalent of Mike Tyson in his prime vs Paris Hilton" (1225 upvotes; 185 downvotes; 1042 karma) ("N. Korea ready"). These humorous responses reflect the same attitudes seen in the post by Not_Best_Korea. Judging from the popularity of the posts, many users do not take North Korea to be a serious threat or in the very least see much of the country's actions as mere posturing.

Some questions on r/AskReddit set themselves up as humorous threads, such as a post from laurenleigh asking Redditors, "What's the weirdest thing that happened to you while sitting on the toilet?" ("What's the weirdest thing"). The question itself garnered a positive karma score of 1,254 and received 2,692 responses.

User The_Brumble's asks Reddit, "Redditor's who have been in a coma, did it feel like you were asleep as long as you were?" In response, Giggleboots recalls the period in which their grandfather was in a coma. At first, users are led to believe the post is one of a somber nature, telling readers, "The doctors said he'd never make it and advised us to pull the plug" ("Redditor's who have been in a coma"). In truth, the conclusion of the comment reveals that his grandfather felt a burning sensation on his privates and demanded to know who was responsible. Compared to the rest of the best five responses to The_Brumble's question, Giggleboots' post gains only minor karma as the other four all achieve karma scores in the thousands. Giggleboots' comment, on the other hand, only receives 701. As it appears in the top five according to the "best" organization, the post has some success with Redditors, and one might credit its unexpected humor to its success. However, given the somber tone of the thread as a whole, the humor may have hindered the post's popularity.

Serious Business

User sandboxtootsieroll asked Reddit, “Are American high schools really that mean?” The user earned 2426 karma with 5847 upvotes and 3432 downvotes and netted 5037 responses from the community. The user clarified that he was not American but noted that his “English media growing up was American” (“Are American high schools”). Three of the best five comments claim that middle school and junior high school were harder social environments than high school, though another user called amandamadhat describes middle school and high school both as difficult. She opens up to the community first about being in a wheelchair and later noted “abuse at home and [her] chemical imbalance” (“Are American high schools”). The final line of amandamadhat’s comment is “a quick and polite thank you” to another Redditor who gifted her the premium account status of Reddit Gold for that particular account. Her post does not have the highest amount of karma, but she shows her vulnerability to the r/AskReddit community.

Another question for Reddit came from user GOVERNMENT, who asked “Conservatives of Reddit: what would you like to call us leftists out on?” The question gained 6148 upvotes and 3733 downvotes, ending up with a karma score of 2411 and receiving an impressive 15710 comments. The question appears anomalous as a reader might expect to see it in r/politics or r/politicaldiscussion as opposed to r/askreddit, given the specific theme of the question. Regardless, the question does not break any rules of r/AskReddit, so the warm reception is unsurprising.

JFX37 brings in a comment about the infamous Westboro Baptist Church, gaining 2104 upvotes and only 615 downvotes for a 1489 karma score. Speaking as a

conservative, the user remarks, “We don’t like the Westboro Baptist Church any more than you do” (“Conservatives of Reddit”). The reason why this is notable is that the Westboro Baptist Church is a frequently discussed topic on Reddit, and a search for the group produces “about 5480 results” when searching the whole of Reddit. The comment speaks to the general attitude of the website towards religion and religious groups. The Subreddit r/atheism has a high amount of subscribers with “1,796,147 godless redditors” (“atheism”).

Original poster GOVERNMENT weighs in only once among the best five responses, as he notes that “people on the left” should reconsider their anti-nuclear power stance (“Conservatives of Reddit”). The parent comment that GOVERNMENT responded to is also noteworthy as the user suggests that perhaps they are from Australia, given a familiarity with Australian politics. It is important to remember that Reddit is a worldwide website and that users come from all over.

Urisk posts on r/AskReddit, “Have you ever found a dead body? What was the story behind it?” (“Have you ever found”). Users deliver responses, but of the best five, only one breaks the thousand-point threshold with a 1,439 positive karma. What is most curious about the response is that, of the best five, Newly_reMastered’s tale is the shortest. The user does not delve into many details and keeps it simple:

Delivery driver at Papa John’s. I found a coworker near the dish sink lying on his back on the ground. I performed CPR until the paramedics arrived. He apparently had a heart attack, and there was nothing we could have done to save him.

Sergei was a nice guy. (“Have you ever found”)

The final sentence is given its own line and is written in terse prose so that the subtext of the sentiment is harder to read. The implication is likely that it is a shame that it happened to Sergei since he “was a nice guy,” but placing the sentence like that on its own line gives it more weight and calls the reader’s attention to it. Newly_reMastered’s post shows a stylistic sophistication in their writing that is unique from the other best answers to Urisk’s question. User JonnyBlazeRSP starts with a date to set their post about finding their mother’s suicide like a diary entry, but the stylistic convention remains front-loaded to the post (“Have you ever found”). This is not to suggest that Newly_reMastered’s post is objectively better, as JonnyBlazeRSP’s post is a soul-bearing post that reveals much about the author’s history, but of the best posts, the former does show a unique writing style that may have contributed to the popularity of the post.

Serious discussion is perhaps most common place in r/politics, as evident in the comments section for Libertatea’s link to a *Washington Post* article about Republican Paul Ryan’s budget for the House of Representatives (“Everyone is under-appreciating”). All five of the best comments have a serious tone to them, with perhaps the exception of OldBoots’ comment, “I would like to see more Democrats grow a spine,” a strong indictment lined with snarkiness (“Everyone is under-appreciating”). Despite its accusatory tone, a brief interaction with user thrakhath shows that serious discourse remains valued by users. thrakhath responds by noting, “They won’t, they are well paid not to. The Democrats serve the same business interests that the Republicans do, just with strategic capitulation instead of advocacy” (“Everyone is under-appreciating”). thrakhath’s response earns him or her eight upvotes as some users found his point to be

valuable to discussion. OldBoots responds in turn, expressing their agreement with thrakhath's point ("Everyone is under-appreciating").

What is also notable about thrakhath's point is that their post receives seven downvotes. The collection of upvotes and downvotes are close to canceling one another out, illustrating some minor controversy with the comment. There is only one response to thrakhath, and that is OldBoots' agreement, but there are clearly eight upvotes and seven downvotes. Though Reddiquette does not require users to explain their upvotes and downvotes, some clarification would be helpful as it is unclear whether the comment is simply disagreed with. According to Reddiquette, users should focus on submitting content that adds to the conversation rather than kills it, and thrakhat's comment seems to do more for the conversation. It can likely be assumed that those who gave the post downvotes simply did not agree with thrakhat's point, but for what reasons it is not clear.

Two of the responses to flamingeyebrows' link have a serious slant to them. User MarineSTA discusses what would likely happen in an actual conflict between the United States and North Korea. They appear to speak with authority on the subject given jargon such as "air superiority" and "rogue elements," and concludes that they think "this is all purely sabre rattling" (1067 upvotes; 196 downvotes; 871 karma) ("N. Korea ready"). Antrix32 shares a similar sentiment, positing that, "to attack the US North korea needs a couple things" it does not have (1473 upvotes; 232 downvotes; 1241 karma) ("N. Korea ready"). Both of these posts give well thought out arguments against the possibility of a successful attack by North Korea on the United States, but they are in the minority of these top comments by giving serious answers. The other three, though they share the same sentiment, do not go into the reasons why it could not happen but instead joke about

North Korea's military inferiority. Again, we see the popularity of humor on Reddit, though one could argue that these users are making a significant statement with their jokes.

User Libertatea posted a BBC story entitled, "Japan says it has successfully extracted natural gas from frozen methane hydrate off its central coast, in a world first" ("Japan says"). The best five comments of this story have the rare distinction of having mostly serious answers, though one might argue that user NSuave's comment "Explain this to me like I'm 5..." is humorous but with a purpose (67 upvotes; 13 downvotes; 54 karma). The comment also reflects a practice on Reddit in which users seeking to understand a concept with which they have no familiarity will often request others to reduce the subject to simpler terms and concepts so as to explain it to them as though they are five years old. The practice is so popular that there is a Subreddit dedicated specifically to it called r/explainlikeimfive with 250,529 subscribers ("ELI5"). User Ndgc does exactly that for NSuave: "okay basically, buried under the bottom of the ocean, there's a whole bunch of ice, which is full of natural gas (also known as methane)" ("Japan says"). Ndgc's response nets him or her a higher karma score of 70 with only 10 downvotes and 80 upvotes. Judging from the higher amount of upvotes, users appreciated the fact that Ndgc answered the question in a simple way as per NSuave's request. Libertatea's post shows that humor is not the strict language by which Redditors communicate as four of the five best comments generated serious discussion for other users.

An r/worldnews post by anutensil from *The Times of India* about "Chopsticks Killing Trees" (2348 upvotes; 845 downvotes; 1503 karma) bears similar results to

Libertatea's post as though serious discussion more valued in r/worldnews given the subject matter of current events. Best commenter Abscess2 submits the idea of using bamboo chopsticks an alternative to traditional wooden chopsticks due to bamboo's high rate of growth in contrast to a normal tree. To legitimize their point, Abscess2 also provides a link to the Wikipedia article on "Bamboo," citing where they got the information ("Chopsticks Killing Trees"). User juicius also cites a link but not about the wonders bamboo; rather, they note that the "US exports chopsticks to China," hyperlinking a CNN article from 2011 about how an American businessman based in Georgia has found success in the chopstick industry ("Chopsticks Killing Trees"). The same point is made by a user with more karma, but qweop101 does not cite their information, but rather just presents the statistic of "960,000,000 chopsticks to China a year." User SOLIDninja responds with a simple, "Wait.... Wat?" insinuating that they want some sort of citation. In response to a separate post on the election of Pope Francis, user teamgonuts earned the best position with both bulleted points with a few details about the new pope and a hyperlink to his Wikipedia article ("Vatican Elects New Pope"). Not only that, teamgonuts also gives credit to user whatbryan for assisting with some of the new details. To see these types of comments in the best five submissions suggests that Redditors not only value hard data when someone makes a point, but they also value some sort of citation, appreciating reason and maintaining skepticism in their discourse with other users.

On r/politics, a similar trend to r/worldnews can be seen, albeit with a political slant. User 17jag posted a story about Costco's business model and how it "proves Republicans wrong" (22,196 upvotes; 19,906 downvotes; 2290 karma) ("Costco Proves

Republicans Wrong”). No hint of joking among the top five comments, and four of the five best comments generate serious discussion among the users. User nickkid09 points out a possible counterargument that a Republic might have about the story in that it reinforces the idea of a free market (1525 upvotes; 337 downvotes; 1188 karma) (“Costco Proves Republicans Wrong”). User LiberalStrawman, however, notes that “Walmart employs 2,200,000 . . . Costco employs 92,000 . . . Not exactly apples to apples” (465 upvotes; 111 downvotes; 354 karma). As one might expect on the Internet, there is no flame war between users when one person disagrees with another. It is possible that there may have been insults in the thread but they make no appearance given the high karma of the best posts.

The same preference for intelligent conversation can be found in the comments of Libertatea’s submission from *The Washington Post* about Paul Ryan’s “campaign in which the main theme was bashing the Democrats” (2859 upvotes; 1300 downvotes; 1559 karma) (“Everyone is under-appreciating”) and jgp_267’s post about the taxpaying of large corporations (5350 upvotes; 3167 downvotes; 2183 karma) (“If Corporations Don’t Pay Taxes”). Again, more humorous posts appear largely absent in the best five comments and intelligent discourse seems to grow. User jagacontest even submits a comment with a link to another source to a YouTube video of a trailer for the documentary *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* (“If Corporations Don’t Pay Taxes”). One can argue the legitimacy of the trailer as a form of evidence, but the tone of the conversation allows a civil discussion.

Grammatical Correctness and Self-Editing

A smaller trend among Redditors that is noteworthy is that users tend to correct themselves. One of the three users who posted about middle school being worse than high school not only showed the sentiment of several other users, but also edited their post with “*edit: a word,” implying that when they initially posted the comment, a word had been forgotten (“Are American high schools”). Lets_Draw’s edit is not uncommon to see on Reddit as it follows the Reddiquette rule of “use proper grammar and spelling” (“reddiquette”). Redditors tend to value grammatical correctness and often users might respond with “gentle corrections,” so it is unsurprising that a user will edit a post after the fact, especially if it was brought to their attention that there was an error in the first place (“reddiquette”).

User treycook followed up Lets_Draw’s comment with, “Kids don’t know how to people at that age” (“Are American high schools”). This comment appears to contradict to the spirit of Lets_Draw’s edit as they use *people* as a verb as opposed to the noun it is ordinarily. The comment is likely meant to be humorous and purposefully incorrect grammatically. User ukrainnigga responds to treycook’s comment, saying “bro do you even people” (“Are American high schools”). While it too seems to ignore the Reddiquette of self-editing by lacking punctuation and proper capitalization, the comment also makes reference to a popular Internet meme that appears on Reddit frequently: “Do you even lift?” The response is often “used to aggravate another user during arguments,” but originated from an argument about fitness (“Do You Even Lift?”). Internet memes are another method by which Redditors identify with one another due to the recognizability from the memes’ frequency of use. It is not uncommon to

encounter an Internet meme of some form in a given Reddit thread, and for the uninitiated, the humor is hard to find.

User InfamousTugboat responded to user GOVERNMENT's question with a response directed at both sides, but what is notable about the response is that, like Lets_Draw's comment earlier, the user's comment was edited. This time, however, the edit does not appear to be for the sake of grammatical clarity but rather to clarify what he means in his response ("Conservatives of Reddit"). There does not appear to be any rule of Reddiquette tied specifically to clarification, but it is fascinating to see a user clarify themselves as it shows that they are still engaged in the discussion long after posting.

Burke's Reddit

Kenneth Burke's framework manifests strongly within these particular Subreddits, and his parlor metaphor that he writes about in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* sounds not unlike a Subreddit:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However,

the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110-111).

Given the digital space that the Subreddit takes up, the ability for one to arrive or leave is easy to pull off. A user can log into a digital space precisely when they want assuming the website remains available. When they leave, the conversation continues, possibly influenced by whatever the user contributed to the discussion. Additionally, a Subreddit or other online space improves upon the idea of the parlor as a user can find context for the discussion without issue. In a Subreddit, a comment or post will remain until a user or moderator deletes it. A user should have no problem determining what the conversation is about, especially if the discussion has a subject or title.

In all three of the observed Subreddits, users communicate with the same languages--both humor and serious discussion. Users identify with one another by both appearing receptive to a joke and responding accordingly as seen in Not_Best_Korea's comments or by accepting and contributing to the serious discussion going on in both r/politics and r/worldnews. In Not_Best_Korea's thread, all five of the best comments are humorous responses, making it clear that not only were the commenters in on the joke and thus speaking the same language as the original poster, but also that several other users who viewed that same post also responded in the same language through additionally humorous comments and upvotes. One might argue that the users who garner these high positive karma scores achieve the consubstantiality in that other users appear most receptive to these ideas or jokes. These users know their audience well; most of the Reddit user base appears familiar enough with current events to know what is happening between North Korea and South Korea, and this knowledge provides them with a

common language. Additionally, judging from the responses, Redditors do not see North Korea as a threat despite its aggression and find humor in the country's attempts to assert its power to the world. A post like that is created with confidence that other users will appreciate the joke and express that appreciation through upvotes and responsorial comments.

The same can be said for the more serious posts, especially those in response to the r/AskReddit question about high schools in the United States. Questions like "Are American high schools really that bad?" and "Have you ever found a dead body?" both are open to sarcastic answers, but the questions themselves are not set up to be humorous. These Redditors clearly wish to know if others had terrible high school experiences or dealt with the shock of discovering the body of another human being. For some users, the motive behind these questions plainly laid out, as is evident with the user `sandboxtootsieroll` when they ask Reddit about the genuine American high school experience since they are not from the United States. `Urisk`'s motive is less evident as they merely ask the follow up, "What was the story behind it?" Revealing the motive as `sandboxtootsie roll` helps to set the tone for the discussion, but it is not absolutely necessary as can be seen in both the satirical question posed by `Not_Best_Korea` or the somber question issued by `Urisk` about users' experiences with discovering dead bodies. Users who respond to `sandboxtootsieroll`'s query enter a state of consubstantiality through sharing their similar experiences in middle school. Three of the top five comments all share the same sentiment towards middle school being a worse experience for them than high school. With these shared backgrounds, the users then have a common language with which to communicate. All five of the best posts responding to `Urisk`'s

question are all serious, showing that users see the post as an opportunity to speak in a language of openness.

The humor found in the posts regarding North Korea does suggest that the country's behavior has become a running joke on Reddit, but it is a joke that the community by large is in on. Identification even manifests beyond the comments and the voting as one user received Reddit Gold, the premium account status for paying users, for her submission. Whoever sent her the Reddit Gold may have had personal reasons for sending her the gift, but it can be assumed that the Reddit Gold was a method of convincing amandamadhat that the post was important and that at least one other user appreciated it. Users on Reddit are receptive to intelligent conversation, and demonstrate how much they value it not only through participating in the conversation but by giving the upvotes and downvotes where they feel they are due and even giving a gift of monetary value if they feel so compelled.

The idea of consubstantiality's relationship to division manifests here as well when Reddit's conservative readership is asked by GOVERNMENT, "What would you like to call us leftists out on?" The question itself illustrates that there is a division of users on Reddit in terms of their political affiliations. Not all users associate themselves with a single political attitude. Some consider themselves conservative with some liberal values, while others see themselves as the reverse. What the question also illustrates is a willingness by a user to put up their own ideology and the ideology of his peers to the scrutiny of the other side. While there is no effective way of determining who gave what upvotes to that particular post, it can be assumed that every upvote was not issued by a 100% conservative user base and that surely some leftists themselves issued offered

upvotes to the post as well. Despite the ideological differences between the right-leaning and left-leaning users, it is apparent that some consubstantiality is achieved, especially when self-professed leftist GOVERNMENT shows support for nuclear power, an opinion considered to be a conservatively-leaning. Users become consubstantial with other users whom they might not ordinarily find common ground with.

The degree to which consubstantiality is found even in those users who self-edit for clarity or correctness is much harder to discern as one cannot determine whether such upvotes are given for the fact that the post is edited or if the poster's sentiment simply agrees with the upvoting user. Self-editing is not the mark of a popular Redditor, but it is perhaps simply the mark of a Redditor. Due to its frequency, however, editing does appear to at least be an identifiable quality between Redditors due to the preference for grammatical correctness according to Reddiquette.

Karma itself poses as a complimentary form of expressing Burkean identification between users. Users who post popular comments or links are told by the other Redditors giving them upvotes that they agree with the message and/or that they believe others should also see this post. Burkean identification is illustrated on Reddit not only through the textual interaction between users, but also the economy of upvotes and downvotes that users give and receive. The higher amount of upvotes can signify a quantifiable, if a bit abstract, amount of identification between users. The converse can be said about downvotes: a downvote signifies disagreement and the desire for fewer users to see that post. Posts that receive enough downvotes are then hidden, dividing the lower-karma users from the higher-karma ones. The lower-voted ones are just like A user who receives high karma for a post will know that they are achieving some degree of consubstantiality

with other Redditors, either for a well-timed joke or a profound revelation. It is perhaps an unusual sense of consubstantiality, however, as, unless all upvoting users provide comments to reveal themselves as upvoting users, the original poster has no idea with whom they are achieving this consubstantiality. Regardless, the high karma scores imbue as sense of interconnectedness and ultimately acceptance, unlike low karma scores that only further cement a sense of division and separation from the community as a whole.

Additionally, downvotes operate in a self-regulatory manner in which Redditors filter out any inflammatory commenting, often called “flaming” or “trolling,” from users. A user who posts a racial epithet aimed at a fellow Redditor will likely be voted down as it is clearly an insult. Then again, downvotes do reinforce the idea that posting on Reddit is little more than a popularity contest and that those who post unpopular opinions—even if they are not strictly insulting to an individual or group—will find their comments buried towards the bottom after having been downvoted into oblivion. Sometimes users may arbitrarily issue upvotes and downvotes, but such a phenomenon is rare.

It is important to note that while upvotes and downvotes can influence what people see in the Subreddit, it is not sole method of interaction and that comments comprise the meaningful communication on Reddit. In Chapter 4, I will show how a Subreddit can prove useful to a writing classroom and the pedagogical implications of applying Burke’s structure of rhetoric to a diverse Internet community such as Reddit.

Chapter 4: Application and Conclusion

Pedagogical Value of Reddit

In the physical classroom, a student may have some trouble with participating in class discussion as fully as they would like. There may be quiet and timid students who have their own opinions but find difficulty in voicing them in class. These students may in fact outnumber those who are more vocal. Some instructors try to directly engage the students through calling on them in class to speak, and while it does get the student talking, bringing them directly into the limelight may not prove as effective.

True anonymity is impossible to practically utilize in the physical classroom without separating students into individual cubicles, which would be counterintuitive to the social benefit of students sitting in a classroom and interacting with each other even, especially the more timid. By separating students physically but expecting to carry on a class, one effectively stifles the interaction between the students and blocks any in-class opportunities for Burkean identification. In a digital space, however, anonymity can be used to possibly enhance the interaction between students in the physical space. This sort of Internet-enabled anonymity used in conjunction with the classroom can serve to enhance the sense of community among students through more candid and thoughtful interactions in a digital space created to complement the learning that occurs in a physical classroom. Additionally, writing in an online forum for the classroom can serve to synthesize the idea of writing as something beyond the academic and the importance of writing as something that produces a certain image of the writer. In a way, a person's writing can serve to paint a more accurate picture of the writer than they had possibly intended.

Anonymity in class work has shown to be effective in the past in terms of encouraging student honesty depending on the degree to which it is used. In their article "Perspectives on the Use of 'Partially Anonymous' Discussion Forums in Undergraduate Education Courses," authors G. Michael Bowen, Robert Farmer, and Nicole Arsenault praise the benefits of using a discussion forum in hybrid-type classrooms in which the classroom is divided into the physical space and the digital space. Some of these courses utilize "anonymous" interaction between students, though it not strictly anonymous but rather "partially anonymous" as "the students did not know who the other participants were, but the instructors did" (3). The knowledge of the instructors of which posters are which students might pressure the students to be more inhibited with their writing or tailor it to what they believe the instructor wants to read. The systematically-imposed anonymity not only provides a comfortable space for students to be open, but also proves "to improve the 'honesty' of submissions" (3).

Additionally, Bowen, Farmer, and Arsenault cite the work of T. Miyazoe and T. Anderson's "Anonymity in Blended Learning: Who Would You Like to Be?" to argue that "anonymous ways of contributing to class work . . . [increase] participation by students who are hesitant to participate in a classroom setting" (3). By making anonymous participation a possibility, the instructor creates what Cleary calls a "safe place" for student expression (qtd. in Bowen, Farmer, Arsenault 3). While the reasons for why students are hesitant to participate in class are impossible to count, many instructors seek to engage students for a more smoothly-run class, so it is beneficial for the instructor to try to engage students as much as possible. By further engaging students, the instructor

can facilitate a community in which students can identify with one another and achieve the Burkean idea of consubstantiality and understand division.

The obstacles that stand in the way of student consubstantiality are numerous, but Bowen, Farmer, and Arsenault found three common complications in participating in a forum in which their identities were known by their fellow classmates:

- (I) consideration that they might offend a peer in their professional/social circle,
- (II) concern that a potential employer/supervisor/other professor might go to the online forum, read their contributions, and form a negative opinion of them, and
- (III) concern that they might in the future be held accountable in some way for something that they had written long beforehand, despite possibly changing their view in the interim (their program is 2 years long, and they have 3 sequential "methods" courses in that time) (Bowen, Farmer, Arsenault 3)

Though an instructor might try to quell these student anxieties by dismissing them as irrational, they exist and are not easily cured. A private forum would likely take care of the second and third concerns, but the first issue seems to be the primary and most common. Therefore, some steps towards anonymity appear to be the best manner in which to solve the first issue.

Burke's ideas of identification no doubt play into the open forum that anonymity creates in that users can express ideas that not only they feel safer expressing, but opening the possibility of other users being receptive of those ideas and thus identifying

with one another. In finding a commonality between one another, two students might separate themselves from the rest of the class in being the sole believers in a particular idea, or half of the class agrees with them and the other half does not. In finding this commonality, they are able to find consubstantiality that they might not have found if it had not been for the anonymity that gave them the comfort to express themselves in the first place.

As the work by Bowen, Farmer, and Arsenault illustrate, instructors can maximize the potential for student engagement by facilitating some degree of anonymous participation for the students. In using a system like Reddit, the instructor provides the very sort of privacy controls that can turn those three problems into non-issues. First, students can create usernames that hide their true identity and establishes a separate one, and in no way does their profile show their real name as there is no submission field that requires a name in the account creation process. Second, a private Subreddit restricts access and posting privileges to those who are approved by a moderator. While not a perfect system, Reddit is an impressive alternative to systems like Blackboard or WebCT for student engagement.

Proposal

When introducing a Subreddit into the classroom, whether to their students or colleagues, the instructor should stress how the Subreddit acts as a Burkean parlor. Considering the fact that a Subreddit is a virtual space accessible via the Internet, students can access the Subreddit at anytime outside of class and participate in the conversation. The messages and posts are static, so, unless a message is deleted, students can enter and leave the conversation as they wish. To foster conversation, the instructor

should model the Subreddit similarly to r/AskReddit and r/WorldNews. The instructor can post a link to a local news story about a new restaurant in town, and then pose a question about how the students feel that this new restaurant will affect the town. The instructor could also just ask the students a question through a self-post. Students can then respond accordingly through comments. In giving students the opportunity to engage in discourse without being face-to-face with their classmates but still interacting with one another, the instructor provides a less intimidating space for shy or less outgoing students. In creating the Subreddit, the instructor is mindful to push assignments that will synthesize the ideas of written communication, discourse communities, and genres.

Systems like Blackboard and WebCT provide similar message boards but openly display students' names so the space feels no different from the classroom. Those who would not participate in the classroom may still find it difficult to participate in a Blackboard environment. An embarrassing post is forever attached to a student's name unless they delete it, and by that point it may be too late. While fellow students are unlikely to rebuke the student for what the writer perceives to be an embarrassing post, the feeling of embarrassment is not lessened. By having a username or alternative identity in the Subreddit, the student can subconsciously "shift the blame" to the mask they choose to wear. If any negative feedback does move its way to the embarrassed student, the feedback is not personal and is aimed at the writing and not a specific person. Additionally, the mask serves as a medium for more open and expressive writing by the student. If he writes a comment that expresses an unpopular opinion, he can feel comfort in knowing that the other students do not see that student John Doe posted the comment but deerhunter89.

How It Could Work

The Subreddit offers several opportunities to complement in-class instruction and writing in a digital space. Creation and moderation of the Subreddit is simple, as is username creation. Any issues that the instructor has in the Subreddit can be quickly taken care of with their moderator privileges. If a student feels that their identity has been compromised by a username, they can create a new one and inform the instructor of the new identity created. Set to a “private”-level of security, the Subreddit is sectioned off from the rest of Reddit and fosters a sense of safety and—hopefully—consubstantiality between students.

Course Policy

The course policy for the Subreddit could operate like a participation policy for some classrooms. Some instructors use in-class writings to gauge participation for students in the classroom and give them credit depending on the amount and quality of in-class writing done. What follows is a sample course policy for grading the Subreddit:

Students will be expected to interact on the Subreddit on a minimum weekly basis. Weekly assignments will be structured similarly requiring students to post and respond to others' posts each week. Students are asked not to reveal the true identities of their usernames to anyone except the instructor for the sake of grading. If a student believes their username has been compromised, they should inform the instructor and create a new one immediately. If a student reveals the identity of another username on the Subreddit, that student's Reddit account will be restricted and the student will receive no credit for their work on the Subreddit. The purpose

of the usernames is to establish a comfortable space for students to interact with honest and genuine writing. Should a student do anything to violate that purpose, they too will be removed from the Subreddit and lose all participation credit for the Subreddit. If it is determined that not enough participation is dedicated to the Subreddit, alternative assignments will be prepared by the instructor for the class.

The policy illustrates the importance of anonymity to the Subreddit. Students must understand that the Subreddit exists based on their own contributions, and that, while it does not have to be used in the class, the Subreddit may be helpful towards their writing in terms of encouraging a stronger and more authentic voice.

The Subreddit could also be used to vote on decisions for the class. In a hypothetical classroom, the final paper for the course is due the Friday before finals week. The instructor grades the papers and gives them back, reminding students they have the opportunity to revise. To ease the burden, the instructor could ask the class if they would like an extension on their final paper so that they have more time to work on it but no opportunity to revise as opposed to having the paper due a week before finals week rather than rushing to finish it by that Friday of class. The instructor then creates a text post in which they ask the question, and then instructs the students to upvote (yes) or downvote (no) the post. If the post gains a negative karma score, the instructor can take that as a majority "no." If the karma score goes positive, the instructor can read that as majority "yes." The instructor also has room to maintain some sort of writing element to the voting process as they might require students to back up their votes with strong argumentation. While the voting process could easily be done in class,

placing the writing element into the Subreddit and using that as the polling place gives the voting process a sense of play and further engages the students. It also gives them time to think about their decision as they regret how they vote in the classroom if the vote is sprung on them in the classroom.

Weekly Assignments

Weekly assignments in a Subreddit could consist of simple tasks for the students, especially at the beginning of the semester. The instructor could ask the students to put up a link-post on the Subreddit and start some discussion on it. The prompt might look like this:

Post a link to an article from one of the following websites: BBC.co.uk, CNN.com, FoxNews.com, IHT.com, or RT.com. For the title, use the headline of the article as presented on the website. After posting the article, post in the comments section (in Reddit, not the site that you pulled the link from) what caught your attention about the article, whether it was the accompanying image or the headline itself. Everyone else must post at least twice in the comments section, first in response to the link itself, then in response to another comment. Comments should be thoughtful and go beyond simply "I liked this article" or "I disagree with this article." Comments should be backed up with logic and constructed with strong attention to clarity. Upvote comments that are thoughtfully written and downvote comments that are unintelligible. Do not downvote a comment if it expresses an opinion you simply disagree with.

At the beginning of the semester, the assignment serves as a soft introduction to Reddit for students unfamiliar with its interface, and it also serves to demonstrate how the course-tailored Subreddit will be used throughout the semester. The process is shown in-class to the students in the beginning. Weekly assignments will be used in a larger assignment eventually, either as the catalyst for a larger research project or a source in another.

The instructor would grade the activity on the Subreddit according to participation. Students' posts are assessed according to both the quality of the writing—informal but discernable—and the frequency of posts. If a student posts a thoughtful response, they receive credit for it. If the student posts a comment that was clearly rushed, they receive partial or no credit. No post from a student means they will receive no credit. The participation credit is placed as part of the instructor's in-class participation policy should they have one in place. The timestamps attached to comments show when students posted and if they post in a timely manner according to the timeframe set by the instructor. If a student argues that they posted on the Subreddit but there is no post, there will at least be a placeholder for where a post was deleted.

To maintain the sense of productive play on the board, the instructor could assign students to find a particular aspect of an article read for the class and bringing it onto the board to begin discussion. For example, students could be introduced to David Foster Wallace's essay, "Consider the Lobster." Students would be instructed to discuss two aspects of the article: one they did enjoy and one they did not appreciate, explain their issues with those aspects. To keep the conversation going, students would then respond to each other's comments, responding with their own opinions of each of those particular

aspects and designating whether they agreed with the classmate or not. An example post might look like this:

student123: I liked the way the author sets up the festival for us. He gives a lot of good detail about the festival at the beginning, like what all the different ways lobster is cooked at the festival and how popular it is with how many people show up to the festival.

I did not like all of the specific details about lobster, like all of the scientific information. I feel like those details took away from the article and made those spots boring to read. I don't have any interest in all those scientific terms, and I would rather just read about the festival itself.

What makes this an ideal post for this assignment is that the student fulfills the assignment in giving both liked and disliked aspects, but also reveals something about themselves: they are not interested in the scientific facts presented by Wallace.

Borrowing a practice from Reddit, students could be tasked with finding a specific fact in the article that they did not know before (or can claim to not know before) about lobster or about the Maine Lobster Fest. On Reddit, users often post "fun facts," introducing them with "TIL," which stands for Today I Learned. As is the case with many of Reddit's practices, there is an entire Subreddit dedicated to these fun facts, aptly titled "r/TIL." In using this practice, students could see the fun in research. The assignment would not be formalized—it could be a simple post, borrowing the same formula from Reddit. The instructor could set up a weekly "TIL Thursday" post on which the students post comments of their own TIL facts. For example, one student might respond, "TIL the act of cannibalism is not illegal in the United States." Other students

would then upvote the facts they find the most interesting or feel that more people should know about. A TIL fact more widely known might get downvoted. Again, this sort of activity will be based more on participation, though the instructor could set a requirement that the fact must be something that the students judge not to be “common knowledge.” The student should provide a link to the source where the students got the information from, and depending on what the instructor prefers, cite it properly according to a specific citation convention.

Karma itself does not necessarily come into play as all of the students should be familiar with these facts already had they done the reading. While students are welcome to upvote and downvote as they see fit, mechanically it would serve no purpose other than showing what posts the students found interesting or not interesting. Unfortunately, the obvious issue with requiring students to post one like and one dislike about a given article is that the student may only feel driven enough to seek a fun fact that another student has not posted already and stop reading the article after that task is complete.

Critical Thinking and Reading Comprehension

This practice could be used as a form of testing students’ reading comprehension in lieu of the bane of students: the reading quiz. These sorts of assignments are more suitable for what students sometimes misconstrue as “busy work,” but they could easily be built into larger assignments. Students read Wallace’s “Consider the Lobster,” but then the next day the students read Stephen King’s essay “On Writing.” Instead of following the structure of posting what they liked and disliked, the instructor asks the students how Wallace’s article works as a piece of writing according to the advice King offers in his autobiographical essay.

It is then up to the students to determine criteria according to King by which Wallace's work can be judged. A self-post is set up by the instructor: "According to Stephen King's 'On Writing,' what makes for good writing?" Students then post their own interpretations as individual rules as comments, then vote on one another's proposed rules. Those that end up with negative karma are then disregarded (though still given credit as the instructor judges), and those with positive are used as the criteria to assess Wallace's essay. Here, the students look critically at one writer's work in the lens of another's. A later Subreddit assignment is then the actual assessing of Wallace's essay using the student-determined rules. It is important that these rules be determined and generated by the students as they should feel that they have some power in being critical readers. Allowing them to codify their own observations into a rule set can help them feel more justified in what they think about a particular work. By allowing the students to generate these rules, the students can feel more empowered and thus more confident about critically thinking. Problematically, the instructor will have to judge the rules to make sure they show proof of critical thinking and if they find the rules fall short, provide some additional questions to direct the students' thinking.

The self-post consists of the rules decided upon, and opens the floor for student discussion. Each student is expected to give a one-paragraph argument, and then respond to other students' arguments for their own rules. By arguing for rules with single paragraphs based on their own critical readings, the students get practice in not only argumentation but brief argumentation. Students must learn to only write clearly, but in some cases write concisely as their audience might not have the time to read a multiple-paragraph document defending why "Consider the Lobster" should be judged based on

Stephen King's suggestion that a person should "cut the fluff." Some students may interpret "one paragraph" as including much more text than the instructor intended, in which case the instructor can then send a personal message to let the student know that they should cut down on their wording.

Where the Subreddit—specifically its partial anonymity—shines brightest is implementing it as a tool of student expression. It has already been said that student opinions could be expressed without fear of rebuke, but personal experiences could potentially be revealed. For example, the instructor issues a question on the Subreddit: "When was a time when you were most afraid?" For some students, the answer may more mundane than others. For those with more exciting anecdotes to relate to the question, the stories may prove more horrifying than exciting, such as witnessing a crime or surviving a terrible accident, and thus be less inclined to relate the story. Under the cover of partial anonymity, the student might feel more comfortable relating the story. This could remain problematic as the identities behind student usernames could become compromised. Students are left to their own discretion as to what they post on the board, but the instructor should stress that the same mentality that one maintains when accessing a website on which they do not know anyone should be kept when accessing the classroom Subreddit. The Subreddit is not meant to be a space where people are exposed, but the instructor should do what they can to ensure a sense of safety among the students. Though they do not know each other's identities, their interactions should allow them to find some consubstantiality between them through Burkean identification. Some may be resistant to and thus maintain some sort of social wall to keep themselves divided from others. The Subreddit should serve a similar function as the classroom in that it should be

used as a forum for safe student expression and that one of the instructor's obligations is to ensure that should a student reveal more about themselves, the instructor should be supportive and dissuade any other students or outsiders from attacking or rebuking the student in question. Argument should be welcome in the classroom, but it should also be moderated and bereft of personal attacks.

Research

For larger projects, students could work collaboratively in the Subreddit to find links or other sources. One example assignment could consist of students presenting a brief snippet on what their topic consists of and what they are hoping to look at. Their peers would then each find a source related to the given topic, and the original poster could then sift through the sources and see what works for their research. For example, a student would tell their peers, "I'm looking into marijuana legalization as a topic." The other students would then search databases like EBSCO or news websites for articles and editorials on that given topic. It is unlikely that a student will use the bulk of their sources through such a practice, but it is a good way for students to take advantage of the varying perspectives of the classroom and also break up the monotony of researching the same topic for a given amount of time. Students would not be required to look too thoroughly, just enough to determine if the source is at least reputable. Again, the original poster does not actually have to use any of the posts, but they will surely find it helpful to see what other people thought of a topic and what other facets of the topic they considered.

The original poster might say, "I'm looking at the arguments against stem cell research. My paper is arguing for it, but I want to discuss some counterarguments as well. Does anyone know of any non-religious arguments?" This post is ideal because it gives a

brief explanation of the topic, but also provides the others with some direction. Students could still provide sources with religiously-motivated arguments as it still falls under the category of arguments against stem cell research, but the original poster has expressed what would be specifically useful to them.

Here, students can benefit from their consubstantiality as identifying with one another through their similar interests could broaden their knowledge of a given subject. For example, a student wanting to research the controversy surrounding Japanese whaling will not know much about the subject, but a couple other students might have some knowledge in the area. One student might have been aware of it from the reality show *Whale Wars*, or another might have read an article on the Japanese whaling industry. Regardless, what the students individually know could intersect in a beneficial way. While the students may not be able to provide citable information, they can lead others in a direction for further research and break down a wall of division between those who were not learned in a particular subject and those who were. In researching collaboratively, the students no longer see research as a solitary activity.

Brainstorming and Freewriting

Brainstorming could be done in a similar method to the crowd-sourced research activity, but the big difference is that peers would not be providing sources. A simple beginning to a brainstorm would be for a student to ask the others, "I'm interested in the effects of video games on people's behavior. What do you guys think or know about it?" Students would then respond in the comments what they know, like "I remember seeing that violent video games make people violent" or "I don't think they've found strong evidence that video games affect people as much as some people claim." A student could

even comment that, "This is a pretty popular topic. Have you considered anything else?" Those who perhaps disagree could downvote the criticism as they themselves have not heard much about the subject. Because this is the Subreddit, students are welcome to upvote and downvote as they please but should be mindful to do so in a reasonable manner. Ultimately, this Subreddit activity could operate as a strong way to gauge what topics are interesting for others.

In this sort of activity, the students are all working to come up with some idea and all share the common goal of starting a paper. While it is not the strongest common ground for Burkean identification, the goal remains a commonality between the students. While this activity could be done in-class as well, the benefit of doing so on the Subreddit allows for the students to democratically show what topics are worth researching. The students who share a want for learning more about a topic like hydraulic fracturing in mining can express it via words and upvotes, and the upvotes can provide quantifiable evidence for what makes a strong research topic. In terms of Burkean division, if the student discovers that they are receiving downvotes for a given topic, they could ask what could strengthen the topic if it is too broad or propose a different topic.

Peer Review

The text-based forum can serve as a sort of conceptual limbo between the ideas of writing and conversation. Here, the students write have their writings responded to with more immediacy than they might experience in the classroom, waiting for the instructor to return their work with comments. A student may turn a paper in on a Friday and not see feedback until the following Friday, and even then the student's sole audience is by default the instructor. On the online forum, the student's audience is mainly their

classmates. Just as in traditional peer review, they know that their peers are reading, not just the instructor whom they turn the paper into. How this differs, however, is that it is not a select one or two other students reading their work but instead the entire class. Rather than write for the instructor with the knowledge that a few of their peers will read this, the student is aware that everyone in the class will read it and will endeavor to write the work in a way that is not only appealing to the instructor but the rest of the class as well. Additionally, the forum can also prepare them to receive the response from others to their writing. There is the strong possibility that some students will be far more blunt than others. While it may come across as rude or condescending, such a response will be a strong possibility in the post-college world. In a business, if a memo is not written “up to snuff,” a superior will respond accordingly and, depending on the stress-level of the workplace, may not do so kindly.

Depending on the size of the assignment, not every student may get the chance to have their work peer reviewed on the Subreddit, but the decision will be left up to the instructor’s discretion. The instructor might introduce the peer review like so:

Send me your essay and I will copy and paste it into a text-post onto the Subreddit, putting “PEER REVIEW:” followed by the title of your essay as the title of your post. At the very end, post three questions regarding specific concerns you had about your essay. Your peers will then post responses to the questions with each user answering every question. “Yes or no” questions should be avoided, but if you respond to one, you back up the answer with sound reasoning. Additionally, your comment should include one specific aspect of the paper that you greatly enjoyed and one

aspect that could use a little work. The aspect that needs improvement must be different from the concerns that the original poster expresses, and must also be either a higher-order concern of organization and development or a lower-order concern like problematic punctuation or other grammatical errors that are issues that show up at least **three times**. Minor issues should not be brought up. If you find a comment unhelpful, whether you are the writer being reviewed or a peer reviewer, downvote it. If there is a comment that you believe will improve the paper, upvote it.

Instead of having students post their own essays, the instructor will post the students' essays for them as an added layer of anonymity to the peer review. Comments and karma are both taken advantage of again in this assignment as students give their peer feedback through the comments and give feedback to others' comments through the upvoting and downvoting of helpful and unhelpful suggestions respectively. In putting up a peer review like this, it puts students in the spirit of revision and proofreading.

In the peer review, students should ideally feel some camaraderie in helping each other in peer review since they are all consubstantial in working to put out the best writing they can. They identify each other as writers striving to put together an essay that is good if not great. There are some students who might not offer significant feedback or respond well to others' feedback, but that is to be expected. Consubstantiality in this case will likely not be enough to unify them, but the quality of peer review could reflect in their future grades.

Complications

Anonymity, of course, does not guarantee participation by students, so there remains the small possibility that students might be unreceptive to a Subreddit complementing the classroom. The Subreddit activity is not truly anonymous in that the instructor by practical necessity knows the true identities of the users, thus only allowing for partial anonymity. They might not know each other's identities on the page, but the instructor would know their identities full well. Whatever comfort a student user might have if they were in a setting such as a support group thread on a different website would be diminished since one person has direct knowledge of their true identity. Ideally, the students can be trusted to keep their true identities secret, but if the instructor wants further assurance they can write up a contract for the students to sign, reminding them that if they expose another student or themselves on the Subreddit, they forfeit their participation score for the Subreddit.

Even if the students are not aware of one another's true identities, the fact remains that a debate can turn into a heated argument and possibly into a full-blown fight. Argument and debate should be welcome in the Subreddit but only done in a professional manner. As is evident on the average message board, the anonymity of the username may encourage more candid interaction between students, possibly to the point of insult-sliding. The benefit of using the Subreddit in this case is that if a student issues insulting posts that offer no insight, then the rest of the students can downvote the post to the point of being hidden. A discussion on same-sex marriage could split the class, and some students who feel strongly for or against it could accuse the other side of being outdated and obsolete or hedonistic and sinful, respectively. While these may be opinions that the students have, they do not ultimately add anything to the argument except high tension.

Students should be mindful of their audience in that it is not just their fellow students reading the posts but also the instructor, and the instructor has the final word in an argument should it get out of hand. It is only at a time like this, however, that the instructor should interfere with the discussion so as to prevent any insults from being exchanged. Should a situation get to be too much to handle, the instructor should make a decision whether to proceed with the Subreddit-enhanced learning or if they should take a more traditional approach to instruction. Penalties in participation should be issued, and infracting students should be confronted.

While the Subreddit will likely work best in the partial anonymity environment, there is the possibility that the students will learn each other's identities. If it becomes a foreseeable issue, then the instructor should interfere as soon as possible. If it does not appear that any harm will come out of it, allow the interaction to continue. Students should be reminded that they are not to address each other by real names if they figure one another's usernames out, but if the atmosphere remains peaceful then there is no reason for the instructor to demand the students to create new usernames or scrap the Subreddit altogether.

Collecting karma is a curious facet for the classroom in that it is possible for the students to form alliances and over to upvote certain posts. While the possibility remains, the scenario is unlikely as karma scores have no value in the tabulation of grades. Even if a comment is downvoted to oblivion, the instructor should still view it and grade it as it could be deserving of credit despite what the other students thought.

Minor technical glitches come up as Reddit does go down from time to time. It happens infrequently enough that it should not affect the flow of student interaction on

the Subreddit. Should any serious issues arise with the website, it will be necessary for the instructor to plan accordingly with some sort of backup to make sure students remain actively working.

The Payoff

The Subreddit is intended to promote writing outside of the classroom. The students would not be writing a significant amount more than they are in the classroom, but the focus of the Subreddit is not so much the amount of writing put out by the students, but rather the quality of writing in a different setting. The pedagogical benefit is the generation of richer writing from the students. The Subreddit ideally will serve as a bridge between the casual but honest “textspeak” that students communicate with either through text messaging or instant messaging and the stiffly formal but clear academic writing expected in the classroom. In the Subreddit, students are not graded on their grammatical ability, but they should be mindful of their clarity: a post with too many errors or too much carelessness when composing a comment in the Subreddit can earn multiple downvotes and possibly partial or no credit for the student. Depending on the trends of downvotes and upvotes, the students can see themselves developing a discourse community of their own with its own rules and intricacies such as what sort of writing is valued by their peers. Students are still required to be mindful of their audience (mainly their peers, but also their instructor), and in doing so the students learn the rules of the discourse community they belong to.

While the karma system has the potential to cause students to take downvotes personally, the system is meant to not only challenge students to write thoughtful responses, but also to empower the students as self-regulators. The instructor is the only

“official” moderator, but students are given the power to police themselves should some students submit lazy or inflammatory comments. By relegating to the instructor of a voiceless observer (except in the cases of issuing assignments and making sure rules of classroom conduct are adhered to), the sense of independence is fostered among the students. The instructor should still evaluate those comments that have been downvoted, especially those that have been downvoted to the point of being hidden, to ensure that students are using the system in a fair and just manner and that deserving students. In giving students the power of self-regulation, the instructor grants students independence and bars them from feeling as though they are not being treated as adults.

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