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Writing for Electronic Communities, Spring 2008
Institutional Autobiography on Voicethread—Optional Assignment

In *Writing at the End of the World*, Richard E. Miller introduces the genre *institutional autobiography*, in which an author “locate[s] one’s evolving narrative within a specific range of institutional contexts, shifting attention from the self to the nexus of where the self and institution meet” (p. 138). Miller observes that the

course of any given individual’s life cuts through or around a set of institutions charged with responsibility for nurturing both a sense of self and a sense of connection between self and society. . . . By linking the institutional with the autobiographic, my goal is . . . to show that we all internalize institutional influences in ways that are both idiosyncratic and historically situated, open-ended and overdetermined, liberating and confining. We all go to school, bringing both our minds and our embodied histories: what happens there is both utterly predictable and utterly mysterious, the circumscribed movement of a statistical norm and the free flight of aberrant data. (p. 26)

For Miller “the only way” (p. 27) to consider our present relationship with writing, to figure “out” what ails us and our society and our relationships with the institutions of our lives “is through” writing about them both. Or, as John Holland (who is quoted by Syverson) has observed, it is the “process of becoming, rather than never-reached end points, that we much study of we are to gain insight” (p. 20). To often we focus on the end points—what Tufte calls “the rage to conclude”—rather the processes, people, artifacts, and institutions that helped get us where we are, form who we are, and shape where we are going next.

For this option assignment, I would like you to compose your own multimodal institutional autobiography that explores a single, unique, facet of your own becoming. We will be using the online application Voicethread (<http://voicethread.com>) in combination with the artifacts—images, documents, etc.—of that process and a script that you compose in which you discuss your becoming. Total length 5 minutes (which is about 2.5 pages of double-spaced text).

Voicethread is an excellent application for this kind of exercise as it allows users to mash together multiple modes—photographs or other artifacts (mode: image); writing (mode: language as writing); voice (mode: speech); sketch (mode: image)—into a seamless composition.

The goal, then, is to weave together the impact of a particular institution(s), a discussion of your development in relation to that institution, and visual and text-based artifacts that can serve as both evidence of, and provide further insight into your discussion.

If you choose to engage this assignment, please let me know asap so we can talk about it a bit and find a due date(s).