

Editors' Introduction

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One of summer 2007's most widely reported health stories centered on an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that found—not to put too fine a point on it—that if your friends are fat, they can make you fat, too. Indeed, research found that there was little, not even distance or other factors, that could contain the “social contagion” of an obese friend. Clearly, this study suggested, you are whom you eat with. In some ways, we're not sure why this was such surprising news to so many: after all, our mothers warned us for years to avoid various “bad apples” (though, to be sure, being menaced by an ice cream-wielding friend was never what they were worried about). To be fair, the *Journal* also pointed out that social networks can operate for the good when people influence each other to lose weight. But we wonder if the story was so prominently discussed in newspapers and magazines across the country because it strikes at the heart of the myth of American individualism and self-determination and forces us to acknowledge and consider the power, for good or for ill, of the communities in which we are enmeshed.

This issue of *Pedagogy* comes back to that question again and again: what is, to adapt the title of Diana Pavlac Glyer's study of the Inklings reviewed in this issue, the company we keep? Who are the ghosts, as Gary Kochhar-Lindgren ponders, that continue to haunt us? What are the particular needs of the people in our institutions that we serve, whether as WAC entrepreneurs as Lisa Shaver, Sarah Bowles, and Cristy Beemer chronicle, or as participants in the always fraught general curriculum as Emily Isaacs recounts. Dawn Vernooy-Epp rather provocatively asks us to reflect on whom

the authors we teach keep company with on the syllabus, and by extension, whom we are asking our students to come to know in the course of the term. Where we keep that company is equally important—from Thomas Hothem’s suburban ecocomposition to Tara Williams’s multimedia medievalism to Daniel Mangiavellano’s MySpace British literature alternative universe.

Why is all of this critical? We are reminded of an anecdote one of our professors told us when we were in graduate school. During her term as department chair, she had been faced with a colleague who refused to participate in the full range of professorial responsibilities: he would not attend department or committee meetings, rarely held office hours, and frequently canceled class. When she asked him to explain, he replied: “I’ve always thought of myself as self-employed.” To which she responded: “If you keep behaving this way, you will be.”

We may laugh, but how often do we in English behave as if we are, indeed, “self-employed,” responsible for “our” classrooms and “our” scholarship, but acting (or at least wishing) as if everything else in the community should be done by someone else? If we’re honest, many of us would rather not “keep company” at all. But if our behaviors are “socially contagious,” might we be responsible, at least in part, for the much-lamented atmospheres of our departments and institutions? That is something worth contemplating.

On the positive side, we end with a thanks for the company *Pedagogy* gets to keep, company who improve us by their presence. From our supportive editorial board to our diligent authors, from our industrious reviewers to our incredible team at Duke University Press, we are blessed. And thanks to you, our faithful readers, for keeping company with us as well.

Work Cited

- Christakis, Nicholas A., and James H. Fowler. 2007. “The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network over Thirty-Two Years.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 357, no. 4: 370–79.