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New Directions

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Students Vs. Teachers:

Who is the True Teacher of Digital Writing in a Composition Classroom?

When college-level composition students sit down to begin a draft of a paper,

chances are they no longer reach for the nearest notebook and pencil; more often than not,

they are reaching for a tablet, laptop, or, yes, even smart phone to begin their research and

drafting phases. Even those who do not have personal access to such technology do have

access to library and university computers where they have the ability to save and email

drafts on the Internet or through an external memory source. Stuart Selber says in his

book, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age,* that it is a "rare university student who does not use

computers – on a regular basis – for writing and research activities, for communicating

with classmates and teachers, for organizing and scheduling tasks, and for many additional

purposes" (3). The majority of these students use writing every day, though they may not

even truly realize it, through their use of social media. They type Tweets where they must

craft a sentence or two that does not exceed 140 characters; they must learn to be clear and

concise to get their message across to their intended audience. This goes further with their

use of hashtags to insert themselves into Tweet conversations on a given topic (where they

must be aware of their intended audience if they want their message "Re-Tweeted" or

"Favorited" by their peers and readers). On Facebook, students are learning how to share

ideas and thoughts on a platform that allows more creativity and flexibility in format. Instagram users are required to look at their world through a visually critical eye to snap a photo that will incur "Likes" on their post. Their composition is limited to the square format of the Instagram layout and includes filters for the user to decide how to best display their work. My point is not to display the various uses of social media, but instead to show that our composition students are already learning new forms of writing and rhetoric that even their teacher may not yet be privy to. It is no secret now that many composition classrooms are incorporating New Media and Digital Writing into their curriculum to "keep up with the times" but with this brings forth new challenges.

Teachers and composition instructors must now rise to the challenge of building this new vocabulary so today's students can learn how to assess this new digital writing, and go beyond classical rhetoric when describing the process behind writing that also transcends traditional form and standards. Selber says that teachers are obligated to prepare students responsibly for a digital age where most jobs will require the knowledge of multiple literacies and the ability to think in expanded ways about computer use (4). Troy Hicks says part of this means teaching a student to code switch between the text message form back to an academic tone, while Selber gives a new list of rhetorical vocabulary to explain multiliteracies. These include the functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies on a digital platform. Teachers must begin meeting and exceeding the challenge of rising to their student's expectations to include digital writing in a composition classroom, and in doing so learning how to teach the writing process in a new way to include Selber's multiliteracies along with the traditional forms of rhetoric in the drafting and revising process.

Before delving too deep into the assessment process, it is important to recognize what "digital writing" is defined as along with understanding what "new media" is considered when looking at it alongside digital writing. Troy Hicks, in a 2011 article, "That's not Writing: Exploring the Intersection of Digital Writing, Community Literacy, and Social Justice" coauthored with Kristen Hawley Turner, gives the *Because Digital Writing Matters* definition of the term "digital writing" as "compositions created with, and often times for reading or viewing on, a computer or other device that is connected to the Internet" (58). Although Crystal VanKooten says, "there is currently no agreed-upon language or vocabulary for discussing new media texts" Anne Wysocki offers her definition of the genre in the opening for the textbook, *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*: "We should call "new media texts" those that have been made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts and who then highlight the materiality: such composers design texts that help readers/ consumers/ viewers stay alert to how any text—like its composers and readers—doesn't function independently of how it is made and in what contexts" (15). She goes on to explain that under this definition that she has provided, new media texts do not necessarily have to be digital, instead the producer's goal is to understand, "that the various materialities of a text contribute to how it, like its producers and consumers, is read and understood" (15). Essentially, new media is when the author remains conscious of the *how* and *why* of composing. So, looking at new media alongside digital writing we can glean that now students should have the opportunity to compose multimodal projects while remaining conscious of their purpose. With this in mind, teaching the process of composing in a

classroom is just as important as it has been, but VanKooten explains how this process will look much different than a traditional text essay model.

Currently, the composition class is very centered on teaching the process of writing. For most instructors, the current model looks very similar: give background on an essay assignment, teach the assignment, give a deadline for a first draft, include a peer review and give feedback on the draft of the essay, then have the students submit a revised copy for a final grade. Some instructors may allow for a student to revise a paper an additional time throughout the semester for the chance to earn a higher grade. All the while these drafts are all created to have the same institutionalized format, and revision often looks into the grammar and punctuation of the typed text. VanKooten focuses her research on new media, digital literacies, multimodal composition, as well as pedagogy. In her chapter, "Toward a Rhetorically Sensitive Assessment Model for New Media Composition" in the book *Digital Writing and Assessment Evaluation* she discusses the challenges of creating a process model to teach and assess digital writing assignments. Her goal is to create a model of new media assessment that can be adapted by multiple professors and instructors at varying institutions. Part of this goal is to make this model centered on the process as well as the product of a composition assignment. Instead of teaching the traditional drafting process, now the process must have student-centered goals attached along with a more formal assessment throughout the process that all lead to the final product.

Now the materials to produce a composition assignment can be expanded past word processing software and text to include images, sound, and other technology. This, as VanKooten explains through Kathleen Black Yancey, creates a challenge in the coherence of a project; it is no longer just words to words and words to context but also repetition,

arrangement, linking, and patterns that can be juxtaposed and additive and associative in nature. The traditional revision of grammar and punctuation can still be present, but it will be mixed with new revision based on the forms of media the student uses. When attempting to come up with an assessment model that can fairly and accurately measure the learning and composition of all of these elements, VanKooten looks to the scholarly works of Meredith Zoetewey, Julie Staggers, Paul Allison, and Pemela Takayoshi to name a few. All of these individuals are more than qualified in their fields to create assessment models, but the challenge is to create a model that can transcend one individual's ideas and research to include the curriculum and goals for composition classrooms across the country. Many of the ideas of these scholars overlap, but where to place the emphasis on a project has not fully been decided upon: the process or the product.

VanKooten decides, and I agree, that the emphasis needs to be placed on both; the process must be fully assessed throughout in order to determine the success of the final product. When bringing in so much new technology, the teacher must facilitate discussion and workshops on how to create new media projects, but also must remain focused on teaching the traditional rhetorical vocabulary (ethos, pathos, and logos) and its application to these new projects, as well as introduce the new vocabulary set forth by Selber when discussing multiliteracy assignments: the functional literacy, the critical literacy, along with the rhetorical literacy. His view "is that teachers should emphasize different kinds of computer literacies and help students become skilled at moving among them in strategic ways" (24). The three literacy forms are meant to be suggestive, not restrictive, and complementary to one another. The functional literacy focuses on the computer as a tool that the student uses. It is, in essence, how the technology "functions" or works. In chapter

two of his book, Selber references a study by Philip Davis called "How Undergraduates

Learn Computer Skills: Results of a Survey and Focus Group." From this study, it was found

that "students tend to learn about computers on their own, with the help of their peers, and

by relying on various sorts of support resources" (30). Of 1,176 Cornell undergraduate

students, the majority found that trial and error, credit classes, and peer support, were

more effective learning tools than faculty support, online help, printed manuals, non-credit

workshops, and drop-in clinics. All of the student leaders in the group felt that there should

be more support or training from their instructors on the functions of the programs and

less assumption that students already know how to use them. From this, we can see two

sides of the challenge: teachers must provide students with ample workshop time to

consult with peers throughout the duration of the creation process of digital writing

assignments, but instructors should also be challenged to learn the functions of the

programs themselves to aid students in full-class workshops and instruction when

necessary.

Selber's next focus is on the critical literacy of computer use. He says that this form

is akin to thinking of a computer as a "cultural artifact." In this regard, students can begin

questioning the use of the technology and instructors can encourage their students to

"recognize and question the politics" behind them as well (75). Evoking the critical literacy

element of the creation process allows instructors and students to recognize and then

challenge the values of the status quo (81). Finally, Selber says that we need to invoke new

rhetorical literacies into the process of digital composition. He says there can, and should,

be "redefinitions of rhetoric" that "can take place at the nexus of literacy and technology"

(138). In his example, Selber uses the concept of "speed" as a rhetoric of designing a

webpage for the Internet. To fully develop the webpage, a student must first have an understanding of domain knowledge to optimize text for web-based performance along with a basic comprehension of a client/server "architecture." From here, a student can then develop text and images that coincide to create the correct loading speed of a webpage for their purpose. Do they want to invoke suspense? Is there a speed that is already set as the standard for web development? He says, "speed must be calculated in rhetorical terms, even though a rhetoric of optimization has yet to be worked out" (138). Selber's point in discussing speed as a rhetoric (which he says is not the only online feature that could be used in the discussion) is to "prepare students to be authors of twenty-first-century texts that in some measure defy the established purview of English departments" (139).

Of course when thinking about invoking change directly related to the writing curriculum, and in this case in discussing teaching the process of writing in connection to digital writing and new media, there are always tensions. These tensions arise between the self as an instructor, between the students, and within the institution as a whole. Hicks and Turner express three of these main tensions: digital writing is not writing, conflicting views of the self, and external pressures that define classroom practice. In the first tension, they discuss the idea that multimodal (or multimedia) writing must also have a focus on the aesthetic and design, along with the thinking and actual writing that has gone into the work. To combat this though, we can look back at the creation of assessment models in the process of a digital composition. For VanKooten, this means having student-set goals (perhaps one of them is to specifically learn a new program to develop the aesthetics) and then checking in with their completion and changing them to reflect the development of the project. In doing this, the focus is less on the artistic ability of the student and more so on

the rhetoric that they are composing. Despite the potential tension here, Hicks and Turner express that "layering in the complexities of digital writing is a new requirement in contemporary society" (68). The second tension they site comes from the viewpoint of a novice instructor who struggles with the disconnect between her own personal writing and the formulaic writing she teaches her students. Here, the focus shifts to high school teaching and morphs into the third tension that standardized testing defines classroom and teaching practices. Selber shows how these tensions and limitations can transcend into higher education by the "nested contexts in a computer multiliteracies program." According to him, the institution acts as the broadest umbrella enveloping a chain of command that trickles down to classroom teaching including: departmental, curricular, pedagogical, as well as technical (185).

Regardless of the tensions surrounding the change in composition classroom curriculum, it is no secret that the changes are imminent if English Departments and composition classes want to remain relevant with the new generation of students and the job market and society that they are all entering. The discussion should be less focused on the changes themselves, but instead on how those changes can fit into and expand the current classroom dynamic. One way of implementing this shift is to look at teaching the process of composition and how it conforms to existing forms of classical rhetoric but also how teachers should be implementing new teachings into the writing process. The process will still include text-based writing, but can expand to include visual and oral rhetoric as well. The process will be less focused on formal paper drafts, and expand to include more workshops that focus on the functional literacy of the student's chosen medium(s) and then a class discussion that looks at the critical literacy behind them as well. As students are

creating, they are still keeping in mind their audience by implementing the traditional ethos, pathos, and logos rhetorical devices, but now they are also keeping in mind *how* they are producing their text and *why* it is important and fits into the growing conversation (as Wysocki says is important in the composition of new media). Just as institutions and instructors had to adapt at one time to implement digital word processors into the classroom, now they must adapt again to continue catering to the fluid demands of students who have grown up with the Internet and the world at their fingertips.

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