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English 728: Computer Mediated Writing

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Reflective Essay

“Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes, Time to Turn the Page”: My Concern with the Computer and Writing
Community.

One day while teaching a technical writing class at Ivy Tech State Community College—Bloomington, I discussed with the students why they chose to take the course. My curiosity came from the fact that many of them had already taken the traditional first year writing courses and that they represented a broad spectrum of majors. In answering the question, the students began with the usual not very thoughtful answers that students sometimes give: They had to, or it was either this or take a speech class. Then, I asked them if they thought that the technical writing class was valuable for them and their future careers. To my initial surprise, many of the students felt that the technical writing class which emphasized such writing assignments as e-mail, reports, memos, and brochures should be the course that the community college requires for writing credit rather than the more traditionally designed English 111 and 112 that emphasize “academic writing” such as descriptive, evaluative, argumentative, and narrative essays. The students came to the conclusion that the writing they practiced in the technical writing course suited their futures and their careers a great deal more than writing a descriptive essay about the first memory of their grandmother’s house. I must admit that though I do not completely agree, I do believe that more computer writing courses should be offered or even required in addition to “traditional” courses. Though the computers and writing community provides many positives, I

hold many concerns about what it would mean to begin to emphasize the multi-modal nature of computers and technology in the composition process. The rapidness of change within the computer and writing community concerns me most: for the computer and writing community to grow and stay effective, it must keep up with current technologies, explore new methods of teaching, design assessment procedures, assure that all students maintain access to technological tools employed in localized environments, address ways that technology affects our minds and bodies, and maintain the socio-political contributions to the field of rhetoric and writing from feminist, Marxist, and other socio-political scholars. The rapid change and evolution of technology makes these principles difficult to preserve, but not impossible. The following essay, while not addressing all issues, will address three: keeping up with new technologies, the effect on our ways of thinking, and the concepts and corrections offered by socio-political scholars.

Before addressing these concerns, it is important to clarify two possible misconceptions that the introduction brought up: first, this essay does not treat computer writing and technical writing as the same type of course. When writing and composing with computers, I refer to creating webtexts, blogs, or any other genre connected with the personal computer. Computer and writing consist of much more than teaching future business majors how to write one type of email etc. Secondly, the perspective of this essay is that computers and writing is a growing and ubiquitous part of 21st Century rhetoric and composition departments. Whether computers and writing should be a field all of its own or a sub-field is an argument best left to others. This essay, however, treats computers and writing as an inevitability, one that brings with it great potential and greater scholarly responsibility. To be scholarly responsible, computers must be utilized in a way that teaches students about writing in different and changing contexts. With the

rapidness of change, it remains a constant worry that students may receive outdated instruction or learn outmoded genres when learning to write in multi-modal environments.

For instance, in a recent online article of *Wired*, titled “Twitter, Flickr, Facebook Make Blogs look So 2004,” Paul Boutin writes,

Thinking about launching your own blog? Here's some friendly advice: Don't. And if you've already got one, pull the plug. Writing a weblog today isn't the bright idea it was four years ago. The blogosphere, once a freshwater oasis of folksy self-expression and clever thought, has been flooded by a tsunami of paid bilge. Cut-rate journalists and underground marketing campaigns now drown out the authentic voices of amateur wordsmiths.

Boutin goes on to argue that because businesses like *The New York Times* and *Huffington Post* have taken over the blogosphere that “little guys” like the everyday writer, the amateur wordsmith no longer has room to be seen and heard. Essentially, Boutin argues that the corporatization of blogs ruined them and their purpose and now the three websites mentioned in the article’s title are much better ways for average folk to communicate. He concludes that Twitter, an instant messaging type service that limits texts to 140 characters, works because brevity functions as the true reason for Internet appeal among amateurs. With Twitter, they do not have to compete with paid writing staffs.

I read this *Wired* article shortly after enrolling in a graduate level class where each student is responsible for keeping a blog. Among other pedagogical goals, the professor assigned blogs in order for us to become more familiar with this “new” and useful technology. Though blogging remains a bit foreign and off-putting, I began making plans for ways in which I could utilize blogging in the classes I will teach in the future—both online, computer-based, and

in face to face classrooms. But I must admit that after reading the *Wired* article, I began to wonder what the purpose of assigning a blog may be when it was clear from this article that they had become “So, 2004.” It made me ask many questions about how blogs should now be approached differently in class--Should blogs now be considered “historically” rather than current? Will more computer savvy students rebel or question why blogs are important when other different, newer technologies are employed? These questions are not insurmountable and are even questions that could drive a course—but what worries me here is ethos, how credible do we look as scholar-teachers when we fall behind the trends of technology and writing that we are supposed to be expert at? Not only is this an issue involving genre—To blog or not to blog?—but it also may involve how our minds and bodies work on an intricate level.

The question of how media affects the minds and behaviors of its users and consumers has preoccupied many popular critics, judges, politicians, juries, and activists over the years—from rock and roll being the devil’s music to the assertion that MTV video editing, or “jump-cutting,” has affected an entire generation of viewers short-term memories persists. This concern, now, focuses in some arenas on how using the Internet changes the way our minds work. In *The Atlantic Monthly*, Nicholas Carr penned an article titled “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” The article is a feature and gets the bulk of the front page by taking up the upper two-thirds. Carr claims that “Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn’t going—so far as I can tell—but it’s changing” (57). Carr goes onto say that he can no longer lose himself in narrative reading the way he used to—that he gets annoyed and wants to stop reading only two or three pages in. The article turns into a query that tries to answer the title’s question. It can be easy to dismiss this kind of critique because with

new technologies, someone always brings up a new problem. For years and years, video games were destroying American minds, but now they are being lauded because doctors who need to use precise equipment are much more advanced than their predecessors and some composition scholars have argued for integrating video games into teaching writing. Similar arguments and questions appear among the articles and books of scholars in rhetoric and composition. One feature of Carr's article is that he argues that technologies have agency in our culture—that technologies can affect or infect, as it were, the way we function as individuals and in turn as a society. However, Jay David Bolter dismisses this assertion that our minds change depending on the technologies we use and the media we consume:

The very materiality of writing binds writing firmly to human practices and therefore to cultural choices. The technical and the cultural dimensions of writing are so intimately related that it is not useful to try and separate them: together they constitute writing as technology...It is probably best to understand all of technology in this way: technologies do not determine the course of culture or society, because they are not separate agents that can act on culture from the outside (19).

According to Bolter, we cannot distinguish between our technologies and our selves because the two are inherently connected. The fact that so many people disagree with Bolter's stance seems enough reason to feel nervous at his dismissal of the idea. Dismissing the idea that technology has agency closes many possible avenues for scholarship and inquiry, possibly limiting our abilities to learn how students learn and what we should teach them. If there is the slightest possibility that someone like Carr's mind is changing due to the agency of technology, then should the computers and writing community dismiss such possibilities? I do not think so. Even if we only perceive that our minds change, it still seems that efforts to understand this perceived

change could possibly benefit composition theory and practice. If I stop observing how technology affects my students, then does that not make me a lesser teacher? I do think so. If we do not understand or study the ways in which our students incorporate technologies into their own lives then we may limit their ability to mature and learn. We need to stay abreast of the ways in which our minds, habits, and abilities may or may not be changing as we embrace new technologies.

Often, new gets eschewed for being *new*. Fear lurks behind such sentiment. New equals change. New equals different and difficult. Also, new means the possibility that practitioners from the past will be forgotten or dismissed. This tension can be felt in the way that Jay David Bolter tries to define remediation as the new relying on the old—that “Remediation is a characteristic process not only for contemporary media but for all visual media at least since the Renaissance...Each medium seems to follow this pattern of borrowing and refashioning other media, and rivalry as well as homage seems always to be at work” (25). In other words, with the new some aspects are kept while others are turned away. As technologies remediate each other, they also remediate the classroom and the self—as pointed out by such scholars as Cynthia Selfe, Dickie Selfe, and Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin—and all this *newness* makes me nervous for the “old,” by which I mean the fairly recent and ground breaking scholarship in feminist, working class, disability, and ethnic studies. However, I do not want to imply that people are attracted to technology merely because of its newness nor do I want to imply that scholars will immediately forget the impact of the past. It does worry me, though, that the break from the past happens so quickly and vastly. As Jay David Bolter and David Grusin write in, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, “[D]igital technologies are proliferating faster than our cultural,

legal, or educational institutions can keep up with them” (4-5). This kind of transformation may cause many to lose site of the historical aspect of composition to focus explicitly on the present.

The positive aspect is that the computers and writing community has always and repeatedly attempted to keep issues that concern the socio-political scholars of the field at the fore. The history, *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994*, remains a prime example of this openness to many different points of view within the computer and technology community. Maintaining feminist ideals of co-authorship and localized research, the four writers make sure the readers know that “At the outset, we should remind readers that we are individuals with particular histories, values, and angles of vision. We speak from different perspectives of age, career, path, and gender” (3). A scholarly history co-written in such a way demonstrates a field that does not want to repeat the patriarchal dominant discourses of the past—they deny complete knowledge of the entire field and they admit to being biased and positioned, two rhetorical moves practically unheard of in scholarship before the feminist movement. Other than making sure that we as scholars keep researching and writing in ways developed from socio-political points of view, we also need to make sure that we keep practicing these theories and ideas in the classroom.

For this paragraph, I do not presume to tell people how to teach or what scholarship to undertake but instead enumerate a list of possible questions a teacher-scholar could ask herself before designing a syllabus or even classroom discussion that makes sure to keep socio-political advancements as part of teaching practices in a computer classroom. The questions: In what ways can I “de-center” a computer classroom? What remediations best demonstrate the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals and which do not? Is it fair that some of us get to teach/study in state of the art computer classrooms when other schools have problems maintaining a small

number of computer labs? How may it affect a student from a non-technological savvy background to sit down amidst a classroom teeming with new technologies? How am I transferring problematic teaching practices and behaviors over from my traditional classroom into my computer classroom? Am I lecturing too much? Etc. Keeping these kinds of issues in mind will keep us moving towards our goal of making sure that our students learn and understand about the socio-political problems that surround and imbue their everyday life.

Though these three problems are not the only ones that concern me about the rapidness of change in technology, they are the most pressing. My faith and optimism in my fellow scholars abounds when I worry about such problems. When grappling with the rapidness of change in the field of computers and writing, I understand that the foundations of the field have been built on sturdy thought and close community. Initially, the issues that worried me felt insurmountable but slowly, over the course of the last several weeks, I realized that as long as scholar-teachers and teacher-scholars involved in the computers and writing classroom make sure to keep investigating questions and carry on the conversation about such issues that though these problems will not go away easily they can be addressed in research, practice, and with our numerous students. As Jay David Bolter points out in *Writing Space*, even though technology changes much faster now than in the past, it has always been changing—change and technology is nothing new.

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