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Print text of digital essay

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### Virtual Ideas Actual Anxieties: Changing the Composition Classroom

---video clip Cindy Selfe “all available means” ---

#### **Virtual Ideas**

I open this digital essay with a video of Cindy Selfe sharing part of her very compelling argument for the teaching of digital and multimodal literacies in our writing classrooms precisely because she is so convincing. Even the most die-hard critics of digital technologies might find themselves inching just a bit toward opening up to digital possibilities after an hour or two in conversation with Cindy Selfe about it. She makes sense and, importantly, she makes it seem doable. In essence, she is able to justify the need for change AND reduce the spectre of risk associated with that change through a wonderful combination of ethos, logos, and pathos. The ability to reduce the perceived risk of making a change to digital and multimodal teaching is essential for the wide scale digitization of the composition classroom.

For more than 20 years, Cindy and many other composition scholars have advocated for a more thorough understanding of the ways in which computer and internet technologies affect how we think, teach, learn, and communicate as well as for the active incorporation of digital composition into the teaching of writing.

Numerous composition researchers have persuasively argued for *why* (link) digital rhetorics and multimodal literacies matter to the teaching of writing, for *how* (link) we might go about teaching and producing networked and multimodal compositions, for *when* (link) of the “institutional infrastructures and cultural contexts necessary to teach students to compose with new media” (DeVoss et. al. 2), and for *what* (link) we need to attend to and even be wary of as we adapt new tools in our writing classrooms. (*These arguments serve as important background conversations for this essay and brief overviews of scholarship in each area can be accessed through the why, how, when, and what links on the left of this page*).

### **Actual Anxieties**

Despite extensive research on digital aspects of composition and repeated calls for shifts in the teaching of composition, movement towards digital rhetorics and multimodal literacies is slow. The well-reasoned arguments and suggestions for change are often widely adopted and advocated among teachers and researchers active in the field of computers and composition. Outside that circle, however, the ideas might be acknowledged but they still meet large pockets of resistance, resistance that sounds something like:

- I can't. I don't know how to do that.
- This takes resources, time, and skills that I just don't have.
- Will this be acceptable for a history paper? I have to teach these students to write. Who will prepare them if I don't?
- That's not my job. I teach writing, not design.
- Is this really teachable? I don't think I can or should teach this.

- I’m not a techy person.
- Students need to learn to write first. Then they can do this multimodal thing.
- I don’t have time in my classes to add any of this digital stuff.
- My students know social media. They just don’t know how to write.
- Why should we embrace new media? Do we do it just because it’s popular or because we can? What makes this better? I think it’s all hype.
- I do not want to be assimilated by the technology “borg” or by “Googlezon.” I prefer to keep my identity and privacy intact.
- I don’t want to be lulled by digital bells and whistles into peacefully accepting the colonizing and hegemonizing forces of this technology and of the people pulling the puppet strings behind the screen.

### **Business As Usual**

These are all valid criticisms, and the importance and complexity of these questions and concerns is evidenced by how often they are asked and comprehensively addressed, in various forms, again and again in composition research (Krause; Takayoshi and Selfe; Wysocki et. al.; Anderson; Sheppard; Day; Rice; Ball; Yancey; Faigley; Hawisher and Selfe; Harrington et.al.; DeVoss et.al; Gerben; and Reid, to name but a few,). Some of the broader concerns regarding power and hegemony, in fact, provide the strongest rationales for why we should be teaching awareness of digital rhetoric through both critical consumption and production of digital texts.

Nevertheless, I believe that we continue to frame our resistance through repeated doubts and concerns because the answers to our questions about why and how we

should embrace digital technologies presented so far do not quite address the underlying pathetic force of our reluctance to change: the pervasive fears and anxieties written into the rhetoric about digital media.

Many of the concerns articulated about introducing digital and multimodal composing focus on problems with access to technological tools and institutional support. This is a serious and legitimate issue, but access and infrastructure (DeVoss et. al.) cannot, or will not, be addressed until there is a significant push towards and understanding of the importance of digital technologies to all composition programs and classes. To get there, the underlying anxieties about failure (I can't, I don't have these skills, I'm not techy,) and about loss of professional identity (I teach writing, students need to know how to write, this is not my job, who will prepare students if I don't, shouldn't someone else teach this) have to be addressed. Adopting new technologies and new ways of thinking, teaching, and producing scholarship is anxiety producing; it challenges our perceptions of professional identity and success; it is risky.

### **It's Not Rational**

As a result of this emotional baggage, then, no amount of reasoned argumentation is enough to create a wholesale shift into digital and multimodal composing in first-year writing programs. The exhortations about the need for it or about the benefits of it alone cannot create enough of a wave of change without first finding ways to address the pathos of the situation. As Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman points out, "We can't make decision making rational."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4LdtAJaZPA> We think we can, but it turns out

that it is just not the way it works. Kahneman and Tversky find time and again in their research that in decision making situations, humans feel perceived loss about twice as strongly as they feel the pleasure of perceived gain. In a later study, Kahneman et.al. note:

A central conclusion of the study of risky choice has been that such choices are best explained by assuming that the significant carriers of utility are not states of wealth or welfare, but changes relative to a neutral reference point. Another central result is that changes that make things worse (losses) loom larger than improvements or gains. (199)

This psychology of risky choices, where fear of loss or failure often outweighs possible benefits, coupled with the anxieties surrounding digital, networked, and multimodal composing can provide insight into why there is still considerable reluctance to "widening our understanding of the bandwidth of literacy" (Selfe "Aurality").

### **Addressing the Anxiety**

The anxieties and fears themselves, however, also offer a lens through which we might be able to discover the means to ameliorate the perceived risk, providing a pathway for change. By doing so, we may be able to avoid the scenario Alex Reid notes in his blog post on "The Desires of Teaching Writing," in which he reflects on the "gamble" for composition associated with the choice between adopting new media technologies or "carrying on with business as usual." Reid notes:

We know we don't have a realistic picture of the distant future;  
we know things will be quite different. We expect that we know where  
we will be in 5-10 years. We expect things to remain the same, or at  
least we expect that it is a safe bet, that no one will punish us for

carrying on with business as usual. For individuals in an institutional context like this, inaction is almost always the safest bet. That is, until the hammer falls one day.

<http://www.alex-reid.net/2008/12/the-desires-of-the-teaching-of-writing.html>

Historically, our unease, or dis-ease, about new technologies (Baron, Reid) tends to disappear over time, but because digital technologies move and evolve so rapidly, we may not have as much time to avoid "the hammer" as we might need to adjust. So how do we go about understanding and addressing fears and anxieties beyond attempts to rationally explain them away?

### **Just Doing the Work**

*"There is ample evidence that people do not learn anything well unless they are both motivated to learn and believe that they will be able to use and function with what they are learning in some way that is in their interest" (The New London Group 33).*

The New London Group's statement about learning corresponds to Kahneman and Tversky's psychological findings about decision making and risk. Not only do people need to think that that they will get something out of what they attempt to do, they need to believe that they will be *able to use and function with what they are learning in some way that is in their interest*. In other words, believing that you cannot or are not able to do something, even if you think it might be a good thing, greatly increases the likelihood that you will choose NOT to do it.

It's very hard to find out if you can or cannot do something, really, unless you actually try it and I think for many teachers, having not tried digital and multimodal

composing, it is easiest to simply ignore the long history of calls for the integration of multimodal composing activities for our students (Anderson; Kress & van Leeuwen; New London Group; Rice; Selfe; Wysocki et. al). After all, no matter how compellingly the theoretical case has been made, how do you teach rhetorically purposeful multimodal production practices if you don't know what those production practices might be? Additionally, the process of multimodal composing is far more complex than a simple transference of textual information to other modes. As Sheppard notes,"

Multimedia production practices are a sophisticated integration of knowing how and when to use appropriate technologies, where to find or how to create the necessary media resources, how to interact with the people involved with a project, and how to prepare the material for the context in which it will be used by its intended audience. (130)

Finding that sophisticated integration requires the kind of experience and experimentation in production that all writing teachers bring to the print classroom, and the work involved in is daunting. This is certainly an occasion to take the opportunity to learn from the literacies our students bring (Selfe "Students"; Yancey), but to successfully integrate multimodal composing into our teaching, we need to spend at least enough time tinkering to have an appreciation of how writing in multiple modes expands our existing frameworks and genres and creates meaning in and through the relationships between the different modes.

So, as scary as that sounds, we just have to do it.

### **Getting Under the Hood**

In recognition of the anxiety surrounding the lack of this kind of experience, researchers have begun to argue for the need for teachers and administrators to actively engage with the tools, mechanics, and rhetorics of digital production as teachers (Anderson; Ball; Rice; Sheppard) and as administrators (Day). It’s not enough to just think about these things. As Jenny Rice points out, we need to be “willing to get under the hood” and move away from the ways in which we have stigmatized the mechanics of production:

we would do well to remember that mechanics allow users to operate a wider range of tools in order to imagine and enact what was not possible (or “working”) before. More than an instrumental knowledge of technology, rhetorical mechanics is the material practice of enactment. (373)

That material practice of enactment, then, is one of the best ways for teachers of writing to confront the personal anxieties that surround the idea of digital composing.

I arrived at my own, personal appreciation for both the levels of anxiety that learning to compose multimodally can cause and the ways in which doing the work itself can reduce those anxieties through my participation in the two-week Digital Media and Composition Institute (DMAC) at The Ohio State University in June 2009. I consider myself a relatively tech-savvy and tech-interested teacher and researcher, so I was somewhat taken aback by the level of anxiety that the first few days at DMAC caused for me. I was in a continual state of panic at the thought of having to draw on some kind of design sense that I was sure I did not have. I felt stupid. I adopted the song “Fixing My Brain” as my DMAC theme song, with the lyrics “I’ve been thinking

about fixing my brain, but I'm afraid I won't feel the same" running through my head at every turn as I tried hard to conceptualize producing my own multimodal work.

It turns out that I was not the only one at DMAC confronting fears related to moving out of the comfort zone of print. The video reflections of the experience by some of my fellow DMAC participants (Alanna, Lauren, Doug, Terri, and Trisha) illustrate the learning curve, or the anxiety curve, that we were all going through when confronted with pushing ourselves and being encouraged to experiment with multimodal composing. Their reflections on the first day of DMAC highlight what most of my DMAC co-conspirators, colleagues in various writing and rhetoric programs from across the country, and I were experiencing: high levels of anxiety at the thought of being asked to work with multiple modalities and new technological tools. The apprehension, whether mixed with the exhilaration of exploring fun new means of creative production, the frustration of just "not getting it," or the disgust of the uselessness of it all, was palpable across the board in the first two or three days of DMAC.

By day seven, however, halfway through the institute, a "tentative peace"(Alanna Frost Day 7) had settled in for most participants and by day thirteen, everyone had successfully composed audio, video, and multimodal research projects. The similar arc across the experiences of these teachers, with a wide range of technological know-how and experience (or lack thereof), as they learned to do the work of digital and multimodal composing is instructive on multiple levels and in multiple ways. It serves as an excellent reminder that fear and anxiety are part and parcel of learning experiences. That is an easy lesson to forget when we are doing

things that we are comfortable with, like teaching and producing print texts, but a painfully obvious one when we are forced to stretch to accommodate new ways of thinking, communicating, and being in our professional lives.

### **Digitizing the Classroom**

It is possible to address some of the anxieties surrounding digital, multimodal, and networked composing by confronting the fears, by doing the work, and we cannot move forward until we find ways to make that happen. With twenty-plus years of scholarship behind us (Why? How? When? What?), we need to stop talking to each other and start doing. We need to make ourselves and our colleagues engage in the rhetorical production of digital texts, however daunting that may seem.

### **Learning From Our Students (coming Jan 2010)**

I am in the process of collecting reflections from students in a first-semester composition class at Columbia College Chicago on their responses to being asked to compose multimodally. I'm interested in observing how student reactions are similar to and different from the teacher/researcher responses of DMAC participants and thinking about what that might tell us as we take our new rhetorical production practices back to the classroom.

### **Background conversations**

#### **Why?**

In the size and scope of this project, I cannot provide a comprehensive survey of all of the very compelling arguments for why we can and should incorporate digital technologies and digital rhetorics in our composition classrooms. Instead, I offer a

brief, selective overview of some of the reasoning that has held sway in the computers and composition community. For additional depth and breadth that you will not find here, you may want to browse through the Additional Bibliography and be sure to visit the WIDE Research Center Collective essay "Why Teach Digital Writing" as a starting point.

One of the fundamental premises of arguments for rhetorical understanding of and rhetorical production of digital texts is that "writing restructures consciousness" (Ong). The idea that the ways in which we use and shape tools also shapes us and the ways we think and communicate continues to inform calls for rhetorical consideration of digital texts and digital media. Alex Reid argues, "if we subscribe to the belief that writing is not simply the recording of preexisting ideas, but instead participates in the composition of knowledge, then we are committing ourselves to exploring these intersections between technology and the embodied mind" (5). Many others note the intersections of society, culture, materiality and consciousness, insisting that teaching digital and multimodal literacy is not and should not be simply teaching the tools (Anderson; Gurak; Johnson-Eilola; Lunsford; Wysocki; Selfe; Sheppard,;)

With the acknowledgement of the intersection of technology and mind, many scholars argue for a widening of our definitions of and understandings of literacy and how we teach it (Hocks; Hull and Nelson; Selber; Selfe; Selfe and Hawisher; Yancey). To move beyond the construct of writing as print and to redirect the concerns of compositionists who firmly see themselves as teachers of writing, Andrea Lunsford offers a new definition of writing:

A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media. (171)

In addition to redefining writing, many scholars have challenged composition's tendency to focus exclusively on the production of alphabetic texts, calling for a turn to teaching students to produce multimodal texts that blend images, words, and sounds (DeVoss, Grabill, and Cushman; George, Hocks; Johnson-Eilola; Kress; Lunsford; Manovich; New London Group; Selfe, Selfe and Hawisher; Wysocki; Yancey). These scholars point out that writing is changing (as in the new definitions), that meaning is made in a multiplicity of modes, that multimodal texts are increasingly central in everyday life, and that students are increasingly arriving in our classrooms with strong visual/multimodal literacies. To be fully literate in the contemporary world, these authors contend that students and teachers need to be able to choose actively among and combine visual, alphabetic, and audio modes of representation to suit their particular communicative purposes and contexts.

Yancey and Selfe, in particular, argue that we have a responsibility to our students to incorporate digital practices in our classrooms. Yancey warns that by not embracing digital technologies, we risk becoming irrelevant to the literacy needs of the students we teach. Selfe reasons that we need to both teach and understand a wide range of composing modalities as a means of providing students:

the opportunities of developing expertise with all available means of persuasion and expression, so that they can function as literate citizens in a world where communications cross geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic borders and are enriched rather than diminished by semiotic dimensionality. (Selfe "Aurality" 618)

Further, as so many teachers and scholars in computers and composition suggest, we have a responsibility to ensure our students become comfortable and competent with multimodal literacy practices. This must include attention to critical reading and analysis of digital texts, as well as the ability to compose and produce them for others. If we fail to expand our understandings of literacy and rhetorical considerations to incorporate digital composing practices, Selfe maintains, "we not only abdicate a professional responsibility. . . but we also run the risk of our curriculum holding declining relevance for students" ("Students" 55).

### **How?**

Scholars such as Wysocki, Welch, Yancey, Lunsford, and Hocks rightly suggest that writing teachers have a great deal of disciplinary expertise in studying and teaching composing as a social/material act, which they can bring to the digital classroom. As we know from our experience with print, just because students in our print-based classrooms have the technical knowledge to produce word-processed essays, this does NOT mean that they have the rhetorical knowledge necessary to consider critically the social, ethical, and material implications of the composing choices they make. Likewise, as Hocks points out, many students have technical

knowledge to blend modalities, but not rhetorical tools necessary to accomplish this blending in effective way. "Students don't realize the screen is rhetorical" (640). If we remember that composing in multiple modes is as rhetorical as composing in print, rhetoric becomes the best place to begin for an answer to "how do I teach this?"

From there, many authors offer overviews of their own digital and multimodal teaching experience (Anderson; George; Palmeri; Sheppard). *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition* by Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc and *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers* edited by Cindy Selfe are excellent starting points for practical classroom exercises.

### **When?**

In "Infrastructure and Composing: The When of New-Media Writing," DeVoss, Grabill, and Cushman effectively argue for an infrastructural framework for "navigating the institutional complexities that shape new-media writing," pointing out the very important aspects of the institutional network in which composition classrooms are situated. This is a must read for those who are ready to move beyond their anxieties and work to create instructional practices that support digital and multimodal composing.

### **What?**

In her germinal text, *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*, Cynthia Selfe argues that educators need to not only understand the complexities of technological literacy, but also to help others develop a critical and reflective stance toward technology (24). Other scholars have noted that

this stance should include the interrogation of potential hegemony of "Politics of the Interface" (Selfe and Selfe) and the perceived "ease" of using software and other equipment (Dilger, Faigley). Dilger notes, "ease is never free: its gain is matched by a loss in choice, security, privacy, health, or a combination thereof." Dilger goes on to remind us that the "myth of transparency" of technology needs to be debunked by actively focusing on the human practices involved in technology and remembering that there is always human agency at play.

The need to constantly question and challenge the mythologies that surface and spread around computer technologies, both utopian and dystopian, is one of the most compelling reasons to teach the rhetorical features of digital, networked, and multimodal communication to our students. We have a responsibility to make students aware of the issues of power and agency inherent in their use of technology and to help them become critical producers as well as critical consumers of digital texts. In his essay "The Administrator as Technorhetorican," Michael Day argues:

any administrator of a technology-rich program must be aware of, if not deeply understand, the rhetorical features of technological environments, for, as scholars from Nancy Kaplan (1991) to Amy Kimme Hea (2005) remind us, no technology is neutral, and all technological uses have an effect on what and how we learn and communicate." (3)

I would add that this awareness is equally important for all teachers and students, which is why composition programs MUST become technologically rich.

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