

## New Media and New Literacies: Perspectives on Change

Readers of the New Horizons department are familiar with the concern that higher education is not keeping pace—that faculty, courses, and academic programs are stuck in the past while new media and new modes of communication are rapidly evolving. Many are asking: “What’s it going to take to see new media, multimodal literacies, and curriculum and instructional change at colleges and universities?”

### Learning from the Not-Too-Distant Past

Not that long ago, fifteen or twenty years, we were wondering what it would take for faculty to switch to using personal computers, word-processing, e-mail, Veronica, Gopher, and other fascinating and powerful new tools. Many early adopters thought that the skeptical and reluctant faculty would never change, that we’d be waiting for them to retire. Yet in only a few years, maybe five, we had to look hard to find faculty *not* using computers and e-mail (even though they occasionally lost documents because they didn’t use “save”).

What happened in the interim? Campuses provided the tools, infrastructure, and professional development (workshops, technical support, and incentives) that were needed. Plus faculty, who are members of national and international discipline communities, saw how useful the new tools were for revising documents and for instantly communicating, with one or many, in the next office or in another hemisphere. It wasn’t long before faculty prepared all syllabi and assignments with word-processors and students

routinely submitted papers generated on a computer.

What are the parallels with new media and new literacies? Most campuses have the hardware and infrastructure in place—not trouble-free, but certainly available. Many campuses also offer at least something in the way of technical support, workshops, and incentives. And many faculty are using the new tools themselves, as “consumers,” to pursue professional and practical interests. They are familiar with reading in hypertext structure and with seeing verbal text intertwined with sound and images. And once they use the tools to produce new scholarship or work of their own, they understand the advantages and limitations of the media and the difference between literacy and literacies, what’s gained and what’s lost.

Where can we find helpful models of innovation in curriculum and instruction? Fortunately, faculty who teach writing and are writing specialists, who help students become “literate,” are in a discipline that has a long tradition of focusing research on curriculum, instruction, and the processes that lead to the development of literacy. Composition, rhetoric, and writing teachers were among the earliest adopters of computer- and Internet-based technologies in instruction, sharing results of experimental programs at conferences and in professional journals.<sup>1</sup> Today, writing instruction continues to evolve as faculty teach traditional verbal literacy with new technologies—what

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we might consider “putting old (and good) wine in new bottles.” Further, the discipline is active in defining the “new wine”—what it means to be literate. Addressing the spring 2006 meeting of the National Writing Project, Glynda Hull, an award-winning professor at the University of California–Berkeley, stated the challenge well when she noted that to be literate, students must have “a familiarity with the full range of communicative tools, modes (oral and

written), and media, plus an awareness of and a sensitivity to the power and importance of representation of self and others, along with the space and support to communicate critically, aesthetically, lovingly, and agentively.”<sup>2</sup>

There are good examples of both the “old wine in new bottles” (traditional literacy taught with new media) and the “new wine” (new literacies) that are changing this discipline and instruction at colleges and universities across the nation.

### Old Wine in New Bottles

Writing faculty—and faculty assigning writing in any discipline—are having students use digital modes of communication to investigate topics and become fluent, effective writers. New technologies already familiar to many students facilitate and enhance the kind of writing labeled “informal” or “exploratory.” Faculty are adapting these technologies in courses across the curriculum and are discovering that students write more

with these digital tools, prefer them, and develop fluency more quickly. Students use e-mail, threaded discussions, online journals, chat rooms, instant messaging, virtual worlds, and blogs to discuss issues and problems, to seek ideas and answers from other students, and ultimately to advance their understanding and assimilation of new material and concepts in the course.

Many students, however, may be less familiar with digital technologies that aid *formal* writing—that which is carefully crafted, revised, and edited for a particular purpose and audience and that for which clarity in communication matters. For this reason, courses across the curriculum are having students use new collaborative writing, revising, and editing tools, such as wikis or the tracking features in word-processing documents that are then exchanged online or via e-mail. Also, because writers improve with feedback from more than one reader, faculty have designed or adapted systems such as Calibrated Peer Review (CPR), developed by the chemistry faculty at UCLA, to facilitate the sharing of written work (<http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/>). In classes using CPR, students have a completely online system to view their classmates' responses to an assignment and to rate and provide comments on each other's work using guidelines set by the professor.

How is all this changing the way faculty teach and the way students learn? New media change what is produced and how it is received, and different criteria determine whether it achieves the desired or intended effect. Faculty are paying attention to results as they experiment with new media in their courses. For example, they are discovering when working online engages students and when face-to-face interaction in a classroom creates the optimal learning environment. And they are discovering that what works for one group of students may not work for others. Context matters: who is doing the learning, and what are they trying to learn?

### New Wine

Across the curriculum today, literacy demands extend beyond the traditional modes of reading, writing, and speaking, to incorporate facility with new genres,

new messages, and new media and information technologies. The faculty in composition, rhetoric, and communication are active in exploring and using these new literacies in their scholarship and in their teaching.

Online journals reveal how teaching and scholarship in writing and communication have evolved. For example, *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* features topics such as "Critical Issues in Computers and Writing," "Technology and the Face of Language Arts in the K-12 Classroom," and "Hypertext Fiction/Hypertext Poetry" (<http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/index.html>). Another journal, *Seminar.net: Media, Technology, and Lifelong Learning*, is designed "to take innovative steps towards multimodal ways of presenting academic knowledge" (<http://www.seminar.net/>). These journals strive to publish not just online versions of printed text; they seek contributions in new genres that integrate new media and multiple modalities, offering not just linear, verbal, or narrative presentations but also hypertext structures that give readers the option of creating their own structure with the material posted in an article.

Further, Web sites and blogs maintained by faculty and graduate students allow others to enter the discussion about new media, new literacies, and the application to instruction in higher education. See, for example, the rich site developed by an associate professor of English and professional writing, Alex Reid, at SUNY Cortland ([http://alexreid.typepad.com/digital\\_digs/welcome.html](http://alexreid.typepad.com/digital_digs/welcome.html)), or Earth Wide Moth (<http://www.earthwidemoth.com/mt/>), the blog of Derek Mueller, a graduate student at Syracuse University. Helpful for faculty who are finding it hard to keep up with scholarship while teaching full-time, such Web sites and blogs provide summaries and reviews of new work in rhetoric, communication, philosophy, and new media studies.<sup>3</sup>

The online work of graduate students is not the only window we have on the faculty of the future. New interdisciplinary programs are emerging, such as the Ph.D. in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media at North Carolina State University. This program, directed by Professor Carolyn R. Miller, is "built on

the premise that new developments in communication media and information technologies require a dramatic shift in instruction and research." The program aims to "prepare future faculty for positions in departments of English or Communication and in the increasing number of programs that combine instruction in writing and speaking with a focus on new technologies" (<http://www.chass.ncsu.edu/crdm/>).



How can these and other innovations and successful models in disciplines like composition and rhetoric, or communication and new media, affect teaching and scholarship at more institutions and in more disciplines? Innovation spreads as faculty share their discoveries with their colleagues on campus and beyond. Fortunately, the lines of communication among faculty are stronger than ever, and the best inspiration to adapt an innovation is a positive result reported by a trusted colleague. If we want to see more change on our campuses, we need to support that inter- and intra-campus collegial network and create spaces (such as workshops, institutes, forums, brown-bag lunches, publications, grants, and awards) where faculty can share, across discipline lines, what they are learning, can talk about problems, and can learn from each other as they create new courses and change modes of teaching and learning.

### Notes

1. See *Computers and Composition Online* (<http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/>) for information about the print-based *Computers and Composition*, published for nearly a quarter-century.
2. Glynda Hull, "Transforming Literacy: Adventures in Digital Multi-Modality," National Writing Project 2006 Spring Meeting, Washington, D.C., April 7, 2006, <<http://www.writingproject.org/cs/nwpp/print/nwpr/2321>>.
3. See, for example, Mueller's February 19, 2006, notes on Gunther Kress's *Literacy in the New Media Age*: <<http://www.earthwidemoth.com/mt/archives/001092.html>>.

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