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SPECIAL SECTION: TEACHING AND TECHNOLOGY

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FRESHMAN COMPOSITION AND THE INTERNET:

RE-ASSESSING A PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP

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For some time now the Internet has been part of our daily lives and has affected the way we teach academic writing and the way students study. Not only do we teach students how to evaluate Web sites, find sources in electronic databases, and navigate intelligently through cyberspace, but we also use digital technologies to expand the classroom: we answer students' questions by email, monitor online discussions, and post assignments on Web sites; we may also have students create Web pages and do online homework and other Web-based tasks. Clearly, the Internet has increased our contact time with students, enhanced our communicative capacities, and expanded access to information for our students and us. Yet despite such benefits, the relationship between the Internet and Freshman Composition is not all sweetness and light. Indeed, it is in many ways an unhappy relationship. To be blunt, the Internet is often an impediment, rather than an aid, to accomplishing our primary goals: teaching research skills, critical thinking skills, and writing. Given the pressure on faculty to incorporate new technologies into their teaching, now is a good moment not only to reflect on how the Internet affects the teaching of composition, but also to assess our relationship as professors of writing and literature to the electronic revolution taking place around us.

Let me illustrate by way of an anecdote the problems that I—and, I believe, many faculty—have experienced in teaching students how to write a research paper in the Internet age. Last year I gave my students in Freshman Composition an assignment that required them to select a monument in Charleston, SC, to research it, and to write an essay that explained its meaning within the public space where it was located. I was initially delighted with this assignment as I thought it had several virtues. First, since the assignment prompted students to apply techniques they had been using in studying literary texts to another domain, it demonstrated the broader applicability of the kind of interpretive skills I had been teaching in the course [1]. Second, the assignment required students to think carefully about their main idea, audience, and purpose (all fundamental writing concepts). Third, the assignment ensured that students would learn something about their city's history and

encourage them to look at their surroundings in a fresh way. Since Charleston is a city that reveres its past—often uncritically—I also hoped that the assignment would spark reflection on how the past is represented, on what is selected (and omitted) for memorialization, and on what is ideologically communicated by public monuments. Finally, I thought the assignment would be a valuable learning experience in how to do research because it would force students to investigate the history of the monuments and explore the historical events and persons honored by them.

Unfortunately, the results were disappointing. Though I did receive a few strong papers, on the whole they were weak primarily because they were built on a flimsy research foundation. I found that most papers relied on Internet sources, each typically consisting of less than two pages of text, and that the research came mainly from just one of those sources. I also found that the online sources often contained the same information (often in the same wording), as if one source had copied information from another, which had copied from another, and so on. So even though my assignment required students to use multiple sources, that requirement did little to broaden or deepen the research base of the papers.

Further, though some Internet sources provided some useful facts, they lacked the detail or analysis that would allow one to gain a meaningful understanding of a historical figure's life and the context in which that figure acted. For example, I got a number of papers on the John C. Calhoun monument, which stands in a public square near the College of Charleston and along a major street named after Calhoun. This monument has a large sculpture of Calhoun holding a scroll and looking down over the city atop a tall, massive pedestal that has inscribed on its base the words "TRVTH JVSTICE AND THE CONSTITVTION." The monument clearly represents Calhoun as a great man, a towering figure, whom we are to look up to and admire. Most of the papers, however, said little about what Calhoun achieved, believed in, and fought for; almost none attempted to relate his achievements to the weighty words on the monument's base; and most offered no substantial account of why he was considered a great man or should still be considered one. (As a fierce supporter of slavery who took positions that led to secessionist views, Calhoun, one could argue, helped push the nation toward disaster and should not receive the adoration his monument seems designed to elicit.) Instead, most of the papers gave a cursory chronology of Calhoun's life, presented a few facts about the monument's construction, and dished out a couple of platitudes about the importance of history. A surprising number highlighted the fact that the monument's cornerstone contains some odd artifacts—such as a cannonball and lock of Calhoun's hair. I found the fascination with such details particularly disheartening because instead of focusing on big issues of how monuments represent the past and encode certain ideologies, the papers concentrated on trivial details.

Part of the problem is that the students' idea of what constitutes good research differed from mine, and I have since made greater efforts to show what I regard as good research. But a significant part of the problem is that the Internet lends itself to fast, superficial investigations and to the instant collection of quotations and bits of information that allow one to cobble together a paper quickly and to think the job is done. Put more provocatively, the problem I faced was that I had to fight against the Internet itself and certain ingrained practices in my students that had been formed by regular and nearly life-long use of the Internet.

While the Internet is a wonderful creation that gives us greater access to more information than print technologies could give us, it is not conducive to the acquisition of certain skills and mental habits long valued in the humanities. Let me set aside the complaints that the Internet is an unfiltered system, that students are often ill-equipped to evaluate Web sites and have little understanding of the scholarly standards that most printed material must meet before being allowed in the library, and that the sheer convenience of the Internet encourages students to ignore print sources (Chapman, "Luddite" 248-49). These complaints speak to real problems, but what I wish to stress is a more fundamental problem—namely, that the Internet is hostile to the practice of careful, sustained *reading*, which is of course a crucial component of significant research. I have already mentioned that the Internet sources my students consulted generally consisted of very little text. But even if they had located online sources containing extensive texts, almost certainly these would *not* have been examined in a serious way for the simple reason that it is difficult to read long texts on screen. To do so takes a grim determination that few readers can muster, which explains why e-books go unread (who curls up with a good e-book?). As Michael Jensen of the National Academy Press says, "People are happy to browse through

online material, but nobody—and I mean nobody—seems to be interested in devoting lengthy periods to reading for meaning online" (24).

Reading online is thus not the same as reading the printed page. Not only does print permit sustained and focused reading, but in some ways it also allows for more analytic and interactive reading than on-screen reading, despite the claims made about the interactive nature of some digital media. For example, the ability to review previously read sections—what Jack Goody calls "backward scanning"—is far easier in books (qtd. in Ong 104). The ease with which books permit backward scanning facilitates the reader's ability to perceive the structure of narratives and to track, review, and evaluate the logical links that bind arguments together. By comparison, online reading, which requires one to scroll or wait for new pages to appear on screen, is slow and clumsy. Online reading also tends to be a "discontinuous," fragmented process that makes apprehending the whole work to which a text belongs difficult (Chartier 142). Printed texts are also easier for readers to annotate, making them in some crucial respects more interactive. Think of the underlined, marked-up books we use for our teaching and research. Those beloved texts contain a valuable record of an ongoing intellectual exchange that we can continue each time we take up the book. The portability of books is another key attribute of their readability. Though we may think of the printed book as old-fashioned, for extensive reading it is the most advanced technology yet devised.

Even the one area where digitized texts have an advantage points up the basic problem of on-screen reading. Some digitized texts enable one to conduct efficient searches within them; yet such searches typically lead to the collection of decontextualized information. Readers end up picking out bits of information from vast stretches of text which go unread, but which are necessary to give those bits of information their meaning. Thus digitized texts are excellent for the acquisition of the textual version of sound bites, but poor for the acquisition of knowledge.

Many composition instructors may also be surprised to learn that screen-centered media, in addition to making certain crucial reading activities harder (sometimes extremely so), cater to different modes of apprehension than printed media do. Many researchers even claim that electronic media involve new kinds of literacy and now speak of "multiliteracies" (visual literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, etc.). Whether such technologies have actually created new forms of literacy remains unclear in my view [2], but they certainly have altered the nature of reading and the cognitive processes traditionally linked with reading. As Gunther Kress points out, whereas books are generally organized to be read in a specific way—from left to right, top to bottom, and front to back—Web sites and hypertexts present many "reading paths" (*Literacy* 160-64). Moreover, books are organized by the linear logic of writing with each element building on the preceding one; but "the screen is organized and dominated by the image," which "is governed by the logic of space" and "simultaneity" (Kress, *Literacy* 2, 19). In screen media, meaning comes from the spatial relationships of the elements presented on screen, whereas in print meaning is derived from the way in which the elements are sequenced (Kress, *Literacy* 20). So when students read online, they are prompted not only to read but also to think in different ways than when reading printed texts. Whereas printed texts promote linear reading and syllogistic thinking, hypertexts and Web pages promote digressive or lateral reading and associative thinking (Barbules 106-107).

The screen thus encourages habits of reasoning and reading behaviors that may be at odds with what composition teachers—raised in the print world and prizing the skills of close reading and argument—are seeking to promote. Take, for instance, surfing—a behavior closely identified with Internet use. While surfing teaches people to attend to multiple elements simultaneously and process information quickly, as Nicholas Barbules notes, it also diminishes readers' abilities to give "sustained attention to any single source" (108). "As a result," he continues, "the processes of selection, evaluation, and interpretation that develop into knowledge are atrophying for many readers (or are not developed in the first place)" (109). Earlier, I noted that my freshman papers lacked the sound research needed for quality work, but perhaps the deeper problem was that the students—born in an era of screen-dominated media—had "not developed in the first place" the skills that Barbules highlights. If that is the case, then the relationship between the Internet and Freshman Composition becomes especially problematic.

Not only are the ways in which students read (and think) being affected by screen media, so too is their writing. Since the logic of images governs the medium of the screen, images tend to bear far more of "the communication load" in the digital world than in the print world, thus producing "effects on the very syntax of language" (Kress, *Literacy* 167). According to Kress, the increasing reliance on images to communicate the content of messages means that "the need for syntactic/conceptual complexity of the written part of the message/text diminishes" (*Literacy* 167). The digitized word thus promotes simpler prose of "decreasing clausal complexity" (Kress, *Literacy* 167). In this respect, the Internet constitutes a major impediment to those composition instructors trying to expand the stylistic range of their students and teach them how to master a hypotactic prose style in order to be able to express more complex patterns of thought and to function in discourse communities where stylistic sophistication is the norm.

Given these effects of the digital revolution, what should composition instructors do? I wish to make three points. First, all faculty in English Departments—not just comp-rhet specialists—need to be more aware of how the digital revolution affects reading, writing, and thought. My sense is that while many instructors grouse about the problems that I set aside earlier (e.g., that students have trouble evaluating Web sites), many of those same faculty see the screen as a relatively unproblematic extension of the printed page, when it is not. Over a decade ago, when Sven Birkerts voiced his discontent over the effects of the electronic revolution on reading, he kept running into the same attitude: "The prospect of books on disk? 'What's the difference? The *words* don't change'" (4). "Words are still words—on a page, on a screen—what's the difference?" (154). This view, I suspect, persists widely today. At a conference where I presented a version of this essay, one person expressed the same outlook: HTML, PDF file, CD-ROM, printed book—it's the same information, "just a different delivery system."

Second, the consequences of such a lack of awareness may be great given that faculty are under increasing pressure to implement new electronic technologies in their pedagogy, just as institutions themselves, seeking to attract students, are under pressure to keep up technologically. Faculty who incorporate such technologies into their teaching are often rewarded, while those who do not may be stigmatized as backward. After all, a clear way to show pedagogical development is to learn a new technology and use it in a course. However, if composition instructors see their primary mission to be that of teaching academic writing—and the reading, research, and analytic skills that go with it—then the incorporation of some electronic technologies into their curriculum may be counterproductive to achieving that mission. To have students design of a Web site, for example, is to move them squarely into an image-dominated medium and away from the cognitive skill-set demanded of the print medium in which academic writing is centered. Students thus spend less time engaged in mastering the myriad skills associated with reading and writing, and more time, as David Chapman points out, "learning how to write code for Web pages, searching for and importing graphics . . . creating links," and (we should add) pondering the look of the site ("Luddite" 250-51) [3].

Recently, much emphasis has been placed on multimodality, deemed "the new frontier of learning" (Kellner 164). However, a composition course centered on a multimodal curriculum—which teaches students how to create works that combine image, text, music, and speech—will continue the movement away from the skills and ways of thinking traditionally taught in academic writing courses, which emphasize the crafting of arguments supported by evidence. The examples of multimodal work that I saw at a recent CEA conference had some fine qualities, but stood out for their weakness in precisely this area. I am almost tempted to say that they were noteworthy for *not* being concerned about even presenting an argument, since the goal seemed to be to present something that looked and sounded good, rather than to analyze an issue, offer solutions, and persuade viewers to the validity of the analysis. Even if multimodal assignments are designed so that students create more research-based, analytic products—which is a big if given Jay David Bolter's assessment that "hypermedia [a form of multimodality] may work against the very idea of a discursive presentation of an argument" (7)—students will still have to devote much time to learning the nuances of multimodal technologies, generating images, searching for music tracks, recording speech, and figuring out how to mesh these elements together [4]. It is unlikely that they will devote more time to reading, which remains the basis for doing quality research, and it is certain that writing will assume a diminished—perhaps diminutive—role in the final product.

My last point is that composition instructors must re-assess their core mission. Will it be to teach writing or the communication modes of the digital age? Kress argues for the latter, claiming that "the dominance of writing as the means of communication and representation" is over, that "a 'tectonic shift'" has occurred ("English" 69), and that the screen has already made writing and reading conform "to the logic of the visual" (*Literacy* 166). Given such a shift, "the single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language"—the sort of focus traditionally found in composition courses—will, he claims, severely limit our students' potential ("English" 85). Many specialists agree with Kress [5], but each instructor needs to think this issue through. Should we include multimodal assignments in our writing courses? Or to go further, should we be teaching "Multimodality 101," not "Composition 101"?

My sense is that even though the kind of shift described by Kress has been occurring, the ways of thinking, reading, and writing tied to print culture will continue to be essential, and students will need to master them to be successful in college and beyond. Most students today are children of the digital postmodern age; they are comfortable in it and adept at working with electronic media. (Think of your students who, the moment class ends, whip out their cell phones, IPods, and PDAs and start calling, text-messaging, downloading, and so on.) Many students, however, are less comfortable in the print world, less adept at sustained, focused reading, at analyzing arguments and constructing them in clear prose, and at understanding figurative language and perceiving meaning in literary texts. Rather than pretend that the digital and print worlds can be easily integrated, perhaps we should recognize that they are in tension with each other, and see Freshman Composition as the place where students learn essential skills and modes of knowledge acquisition that are not neatly compatible with digital media. Rather than expand the classroom into cyberspace and integrate new electronic technologies into our teaching—as we are urged to do—a truly bold pedagogical innovation might be to wall off Freshman Composition from the electronic devices that now govern our students' mental habits. Perhaps we should see Freshman Composition as the domain of the printed word where the intellectual skills inherent in it are learned. After all, if students do not attain some expertise in those skills in English classes, where will they attain it?

Notes

[1] At the College of Charleston, freshmen take two required English courses: the first focuses on academic writing; the second reinforces the skills of academic writing while using literature as its content focus. The papers I am talking about were written for the second course. [return to main text]

[2] See Chapman's critique of the extension of the term literacy ("Brave" 256). [return to main text]

[3] Chapman also argues that what some call new literacies are really "technical skills," which come and go as technology changes. Thus a course "that emphasizes the development of technical skill is doomed to obsolescence" ("Brave" 255). His remark (mentioned earlier) about learning code to create a Web page proves his point, as such expertise is now generally not needed. [return to main text]

[4] Bolter goes on to say "that verbal argument . . . [may] no longer be compelling in an age of digital graphics" (7). [return to main text]

[5] See, for example, the views of Davies, Johnson-Eilola, and Tyner. [return to main text]

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