

Chapter XVI

Composing Identity in Online Instructional Contexts

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ABSTRACT

As writing instruction moves from the defined spatial and temporal parameters of the traditional classroom to various degrees of online interaction—from explanatory e-mails to courseware mediated distance education—instructors have had to reconceptualize how they identify themselves to their student audience. While many instructors have tried to translate their face-to-face strategies to the digital medium with disparate degrees of success, others understand the different parameters digital media offer and see new opportunities for literally composing their instructional identity. This contribution will examine the strategies instructors have used to compose their identities with computer-mediated communications and propose suggestions for negotiating this process.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, the rapid popularity of computer-mediated communication applications (e.g., e-mail, Web sites, synchronous and asynchronous discussion software) prompted instructors, for better or for worse, to extend their pedagogical presence beyond the physical space and scheduled time of a given course. Whether instructors were teaching distance education through online classes or supplementing their face-to-face course with online distance components, they have had to rethink the rhetorical strategies that they use

to communicate the course content and manage the course. More recently, many instructors who originally thought that adopting these technologies would be optional are now “seeing the writing on the screen” and facing similar challenges. As a result, instructors from across the curriculum are using much more writing to present themselves, and most of this writing is being composed with digital composing (DC) applications and often sent to student audiences through computer-mediated communication (CMC) applications.

Even when a class is over for the day and the instructor has left the classroom, the building,

the campus, or even the country (maybe for a conference), the instructor can continue to teach her students and, in some situations, is expected to continue instruction. For example, an instructor going to Budapest for conference can log onto her computer during the wee hours of the morning to meet her students in a courseware chatroom. Or she can leave the students with a blog assignment that they can complete over the week of her absence and that she can review upon her return—although she may choose to check on her students' progress during her down time. And if the students have questions about the instructions she left (or posted), they can e-mail her and potentially get a response even though she is half-way around the world. Likewise these same applications can be used to mediate a distance education course that brings together an instructor in southern Virginia with students in both Washington D.C. and Washington state. In spite of the absence of the instructor's physical body in all of these situations, she is actually quite present through the texts that she creates to communicate with her students. The instructor's physical presense has always been one of the texts that student read (Kopelson, 2002); now through a combination of DC and CMC applications, the instructor can literally present herself as text, and, in some cases, she is asked to or expected to. But how do students read their virtual instructors? And how does the instructor compose this text to facilitate both their personal and pedagogical agendas?

This chapter addresses these questions by examining the strategies instructors, as rhetors, adopt to compose their identity for various online instructional situations. This conversation will begin with an interrogation of the terms computer-mediated communication application and digital composing application and how recent upgrades in these applications have blurred the distinction between two. This diminishing distinction lends itself to new promises and possibilities for composing one's online identity; however, these promises are subject to the rhetorical parameters

of the computer-mediated situation. To illustrate how instructors use various CMC and DC applications (e.g., word processing, e-mail, Web sites, slideware, courseware, wikis) to make ethical appeals, I use qualitative evidence from sample hybrid pedagogical models to explain the aims that the instructors intended to achieve (i.e., how they wanted to be perceived) with/through these applications. The conclusion provides strategies rhetors in instructional contexts can adopt and suggests future trends.

DC APPLICATIONS AND CMC APPLICATIONS

Most discussions about CMC focus on applications characterized as being directly networked to each other and facilitating both synchronous (e-mail, bulletin boards) and asynchronous (MUDs/MOOs¹, instant messaging) communication. We have witnessed, according to Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe (1996), a shift from computer-as-data-processor to computer-as-word-processor to computer-as-social-space, a process facilitated by the advent and proliferation of CMC applications (pp. 184-185). These historians of computers and composition studies further explain that the development of online social spaces, such as "virtual spaces, virtual classrooms, [and] online parlors" helped to "enact the social construction of knowledge" (p. 185), one of the many social benefits CMC applications afford. Arguably, the social feature of these programs that have come to characterize CMC applications is becoming, as other applications integrate social features into their interfaces, the feature that least distinguishes CMC from other applications.

Allucquère Rosanne Stone (1995), addressing the social promise and problem of—what was a decade ago—new social networking software (or applications that were also being classified as CMC) inquires what is new about networking (p. 15) and suggests two responses:

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