

Chapter 12

Writing with Pixels: First-Year Writing and the Social Media Landscape

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the features available on social media, users are able to present an up-to-the-minute picture of who they believe they are, what they are all about, and what gets their attention to the world in a remarkably savvy way. These sites enable students to practice concepts such as agency, situatedness, and constraints as well as gain experience with visual rhetoric itself. This chapter argues that the ability of instructors to tap this voluntary rhetorical activity and channel it into academic endeavors is of critical importance to creating new pedagogies to teach a new generation of rhetorically aware citizens.

INTRODUCTION

Online social networking communities are a rhetorical hotbed for today's generation. This chapter will examine the way these sites enable young people to accomplish a variety of personal and educational tasks. Yet for all of the frivolity these sites offer, there is serious rhetorical value in the activities of the young people who frequent these sites. Some of the technical features provided to members by the sites include the ability to tell

friends and visitors your status, the ability to keep a blog, the ability to display multimedia items which are either user created or found elsewhere on the Internet and finally, in some cases, to completely customize the user profile. As a result of these features, these members are able to present an up-to-the-minute picture of who they believe they are, what they are all about, and what gets their attention to the world in a remarkably savvy way. These sites give their members the ability to speak at a time in their lives when they are often

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silenced or feel ignored. Additionally, users are practicing concepts such as agency, situatedness, and constraints as well as gaining experience with visual rhetoric itself. The ability of instructors to tap this voluntary rhetorical activity and channel it into academic endeavors is of critical importance to creating new pedagogies to teach a new generation of rhetorically aware citizens.

As a result of the vastly changed media landscape in which students find themselves, I would assert that the First-Year Writing experience likewise needs to change and adapt. Assigning multimedia assignments and changing forms has been a common response to these changed circumstances. Yet changed assignments, while a necessary beginning, does not represent the totality of the changing landscape of First-Year Writing. In conjunction with curricular changes, pedagogical changes must simultaneously occur as well. That is, in addition to changing what students write and what they learn, we must also change how they write and learn.

Changing student writing experiences necessarily must represent an entire change in the ecosystem of writing within which students find themselves. To describe this changing environment, I argue for a conception of what that type and degree of pedagogical change looks like. In particular, I assert that the instructor needs to take a designing role in the crafting of the student experience. Rather than leaving choices up to administrators and institutional CMS programs, instructors need to be able to utilize tools that students can use in rhetorically savvy ways as well as craft customized experiences for their students. I end my analysis by describing in detail my utilization of the Drupal system as a course CMS as well as the employment of Google+ in my First-Year Writing courses. Ultimately, I posit that the new media landscape requires increased technological literacies and flexibility of the part of the writing instructor.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF WRITING INSTRUCTION

First-Year Writing should concern itself with the awareness of power structures, ideology, and their practices need to form the basis of an integrated, complex system of literacies that I will term social multimodal literacy. I envision this type of literacy as not limited to technology, or the techne related aspects of various rhetorical processes, or social awareness and engagement, but rather as sufficient mastery of the network of all of these individual literacies combined.

When one speaks of literacies, a wide array of competing and, at times, discordant definitions come to mind. For the sake of clarity, I will define “literacy” as minimal ability required to be considered a competent and accepted member of society. Inherent in this definition are two sets of concepts. The first set is, power and authority. That is, the notion of literacy itself represents a judging of whether people have met or failed to meet a given standard. This standard is established by operations of power and usually entails stakes of some sort. In other words, people with some form or version of authority have decided upon what they agree is the standard, impose that standard upon others, and attach some sort of consequences for those who fail to meet the standard. The second set, which I would argue is equally important, is the notion of adaptability. This concept of literacy does not specify media or modes of communication because adaptability is the never-ending mutability of technology. To limit the definition of literacy to just writing or just writing in a specific, rigid genre ignores new literacies and the new media that construct them. The metaphor of shooting at a moving target is particularly apropos here. As society progresses, so do ideas of literacy and competency.

As a field, the discipline of Rhetoric and Writing Studies grapples with these multi-layered issues within our intellectual and research endeavors.

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