

16

STASIS AND CHANGE

The Role of Independent Composition Programs and the Dynamic Nature of Literacy

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As a collection, the essays in *Field of Dreams* tell a compelling story about our profession's willingness to embrace change. They demonstrate, for instance, a commitment to rethinking the relationship between programs of literary studies and programs of writing studies and the role both play within twenty-first century universities. And they illustrate, as well, a recognition that writing instruction may need to be restructured to better address the needs of students and the university at large.

At the same time, however, these essays also attest to our profession's investment in stasis—most particularly, in our continued investment in, and single-minded focus on, alphabetic print, literacy. This particular investment limits our understanding of composition as practiced in many digital environments and keeps us from acknowledging the “turn to the visual” (Kress 66) that has fundamentally changed communication in contemporary settings.

Although most of the programs in this collection have been willing to reinvent themselves and their responsibilities in light of their changing relationships with traditional departments of English, they have also—for the most part—resisted the challenge of reexamining their own investment in print and of addressing the dramatic shift from the verbal to the visual. The titles of most of these programs—Technical and Professional Writing Program, the Department of Writing, Centre for Academic Writing, the Department of Writing and Linguistics—attest to the value they continue to place on conventional forms of alphabetic print literacy. Although such an investment is not problematic in and of itself, when pursued with a single-minded focus, it can result in an incomplete understanding of composition as practiced at the beginning of the twenty-first century—especially within electronic environments.

Such an investment tends to ignore the ways in which the literacies of technology are becoming inextricably linked to the literacies of print.

This chapter attempts to examine why independent programs might have subscribed to this limited perspective on written composition and how they might take the lead—in coming years—to expand our profession's understanding of composition as both a verbal *and* visual art, and, increasingly, an aural/oral art as well.

SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE PACE OF CHANGE, THE RISE OF THE INFORMATION AGE, AND THE TURN TO THE VISUAL

Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) notes that the condition of post-modernism—at a fundamental level—is a function of rapid and extensive social change: the disturbing disappearance of familiar anchoring institutions such as nation states, the dizzying global expansion and rapid multiplication of micropolitical entities, the explosive growth of alienating forces like global crime and terrorism, the undermining of authoritative systems, and the disappearance of a single version of Truth.

This rapid pace of change has been driven—at least in part—by the rise of computers and the linking of institutions, groups, and individuals through an interconnected network of communication technologies: computers, televisions, cell phones, and fax machines, among them. Importantly, these new communication technologies—scholars like Baudrillard, Castells (1996), Jameson, and Star point out—have contributed to changing not only political and social structures, but the very ways in which people understand the world, make meaning, and formulate their own individual and group identities.

Within these new electronic environments the very landscape of communication and the fundamental forms of human exchange are being altered. In particular, as Gunther Kress argues, visual forms of literacy are displacing verbal forms, and alphabetic texts are being challenged by texts comprised of visual images, multimedia elements, diagrams, photographs, sound, and animations—what we might call a multimodal approach to composition. This change is so dramatic and fundamental, Kress adds, that our conventional understanding of literacy and an “emphasis on language alone simply will no longer do” (67), especially in defining the intellectual territory of English composition programs.

Stasis and Change

Mostly, English composition programs have responded to these world-order changes by neglecting them—preferring, instead, to rely on

the historical primacy of writing, as sedimented in our culture and imaginations over the past few centuries.

In many cases, programs have taken this approach because teachers of writing—educated in the age of print and invested in their own success as producers and consumers of alphabetic texts—know so little about the emerging forms of visual literacy and even less perhaps about the multimodal contexts in which these literacies are emerging. And because so few English teachers can, understandably, predict or adapt easily to the emerging power of a visual and multimodal communication, the vast majority of our profession remains unable to design and unwilling to offer instruction that goes beyond the alphabetic.

This state of affairs should not surprise us. More than twenty years ago, in her book *Culture and Commitment*, Margaret Mead (1970) argued that the pace of change in a culture determines—at least in part—the way in which information is transferred to succeeding generations, as well as the ways in which educational efforts are conducted.

In this volume, Mead describes three different cultural styles, distinguished by the ways in which children are prepared for adulthood. The first of these styles, the “postfigurative,” characterizes societies in which change is largely imperceptible and the “future repeats the past.” In such cultures, adults are able to pass along the necessary knowledge to children. “The essential characteristic of postfigurative cultures,” Mead maintains, “is the assumption, expressed by members of the older generation in their every act, that their way of life (however many changes may, in fact, be embodied in it) is unchanging, eternally the same” (Mead, 1970,14). Education within such cultures privileges the passing down of traditional values and knowledge through an adult teacher.

The second of Mead’s styles—that characterizing “cofigurative” cultures—arises when some form of disruption is experienced by a society. As Mead notes, further, such disruptions may result from the “development of new forms of technology in which the old are not expert” (39). In this kind of culture, young people look to their contemporaries for guidance in making choices rather than relying on their elders for expertise and for role models in a changing world.

A third, and final, cultural style—which Mead terms the “prefigurative”—is symptomatic of a world changing so fast that it exists “without models and without precedent.” In prefigurative cultures, change is so rapid that “neither parents nor teachers, lawyers, doctors, skilled workers, inventors, preachers, or prophets” (xx) can teach children what

they need to know about the world. The prefigurative cultural style, Mead argues, prevails in a world where the “past, the culture that had shaped [young adults’] understanding—their thoughts, their feelings, and their conceptions of the world—was no sure guide to the present. And the elders among them, bound to the past, [can] provide no models for the future” (70).

In the prefigurative culture of twenty-first century America, then, it is little wonder that most adults have limited success in predicting the changes happening around us, in anticipating and coping with the world as it morphs through successive and confusing new forms. Similarly, it is little wonder that English composition teachers, and most writing programs, have had limited success in predicting and understanding the importance of visual, spatial, and multimodal literacies. Nor is it surprising that so many programs offer courses on technical writing, creative writing, and professional writing, while so few offer instruction in the design of visual texts, visual argumentation, or multimedia composition.

Our single-minded focus on alphabetic literacy—and our adherence to standards for producing writing and consuming it—has had its intellectual costs. As Kress notes,

The focus on language alone has meant a neglect, an overlooking, even suppression of the potentials of representational and communicational modes in particular cultures; an often repressive and always systematic neglect of human potentials in many of these areas; and a neglect equally, as a consequence, of the development of theoretical understandings of such modes. Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they afford different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world, and through this differential engagement with the world, make possible differential possibilities of development: bodily, cognitively, affectively. Or, to put it provocatively: the single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language has dampened the full development of all kinds of human potentials, through all the sensorial possibilities of human bodies, in all kinds of respects, cognitively and affectively, in two and three dimensional representation. (85)

As Kress suggests, another important reason for our adherence to alphabetic literacy has to do with our personal and professional investment—as specialists and practitioners—in writing, writing instruction and writing programs. It is much easier, given our historically determined education, abilities, experiences, and expertise, to keep reinventing a scholarly and instructional business centered on the written word

than it is to undertake the difficult work of expanding our understanding of composition beyond the horizon of writing. Operating from this vantage point, we can avoid recognizing the power of new visual and multimodal literacies, dismiss these literacies as some other department's responsibility, or refuse to consider them literacies at all. This same perspective can provide newly independent writing programs, already engaged in the risky endeavor of defining their role and credibility within an institution, with a justifiable excuse to limit composition instruction to historically valorized alphabetic forms.

Unfortunately, the adherence to the status quo associated with this perspective has become increasingly inadequate as a response to the changing forms and formats of literacy, and it has limited our attempts to expand our theoretical understanding of composing as a visual and multimodal art as well as a verbal endeavor. Kress notes,

Most obviously, if language is no longer the central semiotic mode, then theories of language can at best offer explanations for a part of the communicational landscape only. Moreover, theories of language will not serve to explain the other semiotic modes, unless one assumes, counterfactually, that they are, in every significant way like language; nor will theories of language explain and describe the *interrelations* between the different modes, language included, which are characteristically used in the multimodal semiotic objects—texts—of the contemporary period. (82)

Hence, it is incumbent upon new freestanding composition programs to lead the way in incorporating the full range of composing strategies into their curricula, thus establishing innovative instructional models for the rest of us to follow.

Literacy is a Movie, Not a Snapshot

Contemporary scholars of literacy—among them, Street, Gee, H. J. Graff, and Brandt (1995, 1998, 1999)—have demonstrated the dynamic and culturally determined nature of literacy activities as they are practiced, valued, and situated in particular historical periods, cultural milieux, and material conditions. Brandt (1995), for instance, has noted that, with the invention of computer-based communication technologies, literacies have accumulated at the end of the twentieth century. Proliferating computer-based literacies, she notes, have imparted a “complex flavor even to elementary acts of reading and writing, . . . creating new and hybrid forms of literacy where once there might have been fewer

and more circumscribed forms.” This “rapid proliferation and diversification of literacy” places increasing pressure on individuals, whose ultimate success may be “best measured by a person’s capacity to amalgamate new reading and writing practices in response to rapid social change” (651).

Such work suggests that forms of literacy have cultural life spans, half-lives, determined by their “fitness” with—and influence on—the “existing stock of social forces and ideas” (Deibert 31), political and economic formations, and available communication environments. Literacies accumulate most rapidly, we suspect, when a culture is undergoing a particularly dramatic or radical transition. During such a period, humans value and practice both past and present forms of literacy that exist simultaneously. Hence, in our contemporary culture, which is making a complicated and messy transition from the conditions characterizing modernism to the conditions characterizing postmodernism—along with the related transitions from a print-based culture to a digitally based culture and from a verbal culture to a visual or multimodal culture—multiple literacies accumulate and compete. In this ecology,¹ situated historically, contextualized culturally, and articulated to a specific set of material conditions in the lived experiences of individuals, we practice and value multiple forms of print and digital literacies; alphabetic literacies, visual literacies, and intertextual forms of media literacies (George and Shoos).

Eventually, however, this accumulation reaches a limit—humans can cope with only so many literacies at once and the cultural distribution of literacies takes time to unfold—and, thus, a process of selection occurs. Sets of literacy practices that fit less well with the changing cultural ecology fade, while other literacy practices that fit more robustly with that context flourish and contend with each other. Examples of emerging, competing, and fading literacies are not difficult to find. The specific literacy practices associated with letters handwritten on paper, for instance—which fit well in a culture that could depend on relatively cheap postal delivery service, a corporate sector based primarily in the United States, and an educational system that provided constant practice in cursive writing and placed a high value on a legible hand—are already fading in the United States. And email as a literacy practice—which has a robust fit with the growth of electronic networks, global markets, and international financial systems—is flourishing and now competing with the genres of both the personal letter and the business memorandum. Similarly, literacies that value extended lines of linear argument or strict adherence to forms associated with print-based essays

are now emerging and contending—certainly in online settings if not in schools—with literacies that value hypertextual, web-based organization, and the visual presentation of material (Kress).

AN EXPANDED AND DYNAMIC CONCEPTION OF COMPOSITION

Especially during times of rapid and dramatic social and cultural transformation such as that characterizing the rise of this information age² and the turn to the visual, both traditional and independent composition programs need to be increasingly open in our intellectual understanding of composing and composition instruction, not more constrained. And both kinds of programs need to recognize, study, and address not simply a limited set of composing approaches and media—for example, those that depend solely or primarily on alphabetic systems—but, rather, a full range of composing approaches: those that may use images, animations, sounds, and multiple media; and those that represent newly emerging literacies *as well as* established literacies *and* competing literacies *and* fading literacies. Faculty in these increasingly expansive programs need to understand more about how the standards of such literacies (emerging, established, competing, *and* fading) operate to shape texts, the processes of composing, and the outcomes of composing, within specific historical periods and cultural ecologies. They need to do this work in order to help students negotiate and reconcile the contested values and practices of composing that they will encounter and produce during their lifetimes. And they need to do this work in order to help teachers of English composition negotiate these radical changes of composing practices and values.

We suggest that independent composition programs may prove to be important, and even ideal, sites for such work. Such programs, after all, often owe their genesis to departments of English, which have themselves paid the price of investing too heavily in historic forms of literacy and ignoring emerging literacies and literacy values. Thus, units like the multimedia writing and technical communication department at Arizona State University may understand better than more conventional English departments the danger of focusing so exclusively on conventional forms of print-based literacy that we ignore emerging literacy practices and values.

If independent programs—and, indeed, writing programs in general—fail to expand their understanding of composition to include visually based texts, multimedia compositions, and texts composed of

animations, images, and sound, they run the risk of seeing their new departments decline in relevance to students and to the larger public and, thus, of experiencing, in relatively short order, the same fate as the English literature programs they left behind.

Reconceiving Composing Practices

How might independent programs begin such a task? Certainly, faculty can start by attending as closely to students' online literacy practices as they do to their more traditional writing practices; by listening closely, and with open minds, to what students are saying about the role of new-media compositions in the world they inhabit; and by expanding their definitions of "texts" and "composing" practices to include a range of other behaviors, among them, reading and composing images and animations; creating multimedia assemblages; combining visual elements, sounds, and language symbols into alternatively organized and presented forms of communication in digital environments.

Faculty in independent composition departments, as well as those in programs that remain situated in departments of English, can also expand their understanding of composing by studying the practices, values, and strategic approaches of other composition specialists: multimedia designers and artists, digital photographers, poets who work in multiple media, and interactive fiction authors, among others. Additionally, composition departments can hire new faculty whose expertise goes beyond print literacy to encompass some of the alternative composition approaches mentioned above.

Within independent composition departments that exist at institutions lacking both material and electronic resources (often, but not always, institutions that serve large populations of students of color or poor students), it may seem almost frivolous to focus on the kinds of new media texts we have mentioned here.³ In fact, however, these are the very best—and most important—sites for an expanded understanding of composition and multiple literacies.

Independent composition departments in such locations should continue to fight vigorously for all students' access to electronic composing environments and for their own access to these environments. Unless we can help students of color, women, and poor students compose rhetorically effective texts in these environments and help them become critically aware of their own and others' rhetorical success in doing so, we run the risk of creating, yet again, "have nots" in a culture that associates

power, increasingly, with technological reach, of being passive consumers of electronic texts, but not being able to produce these texts. Electronic composing environments are essential for all students *because* they are sites of political activism and power. As Manuel Castells explains, such environments are places within which individuals can connect with others who share their interests, values, political commitments, and experiences. It is through these electronic connections that individuals can participate in forging the new set of “codes” under which societies will be “re-thought, and re-established” during the rest of this long century (1997, 360). Hence, departments’ failure to address the literacies of technology will have serious implications for the future of writing programs but, more importantly, will have enormous implications—and dangerous ones—for students. We must give the new literacies their due.

NOTES

1. In using this ecological metaphor, we follow—at least in part—the lead of other scholars, such as Michael Deibert who uses the term to refer to the “existing stock of social forces and ideas,” the current set of historic, political, and economic formations comprising the environment within which communication technologies are invented and developed (31), and Bertram Bruce and Maureen Hogan, who advocate an ecological model for studying literacy in technological environments.

The specific ecological model we construct in this paper is structured by its historical situatedness, its cultural context (including ideological, educational, political, and social formations), and the specific set of material conditions on which it is based and which it provides individuals.

We also try to suggest that this model is characterized by a complex “duality of structuring,” between the historical, cultural, and material environment within which individuals develop technological literacy and their own personal values, motivations, attitudes, resources, and actions as social agents (Giddens, 1979; Manuel Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998). That is, although the ecology within which individuals develop technological literacy clearly affects individuals and their literacies, individuals are also continually involved in actively shaping the ecology through their discursive and literate practices; and according to their personal motivations, interests, and resources. In this sense, individuals often make the existing conditions of an ecology, even when

- they are not ideal, work for them and support their technological literacy activities in unexpected ways. These reciprocal processes have effects at multiple levels (micro, medial, and macro).
2. A term used by Manuel Castells (1996) to describe the era generated by the “converging set of technologies in microelectronics, computing (machines and software), telecommunications/broadcasting, and optoelectronics” (30) and the “networked society” (21) that has transformed “all domains of human activity” (31).
 3. We recognize the obstacles that many departments face in enacting these changes. Admittedly, a neglect of multimodal forms of literacy is accompanied often by a scarcity of resources, even at wealthy institutions. The costs of technological change can be extraordinarily high. (See, for example, Charles Moran’s “The Winds—and Costs—of Change.” And we would argue that a departments’ costs for technology have only risen since this article was first written in 1993.) In order to incorporate multimodal forms of composition instruction into existing programs, there must be the wherewithal not only to establish cutting-edge computer facilities but also to hire faculty and staff who demonstrate high levels of technological sophistication.