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THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF WEB GENRES IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

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The genres in which writers communicate evolve, and this evolution is now strikingly evident on the World Wide Web, where millions of people create documents for an ever-burgeoning number of sites. As teachers, the two of us have discovered that working with Web genres in the writing classroom is no easy task, largely because of the differing perceptions and experiences individuals bring to Web compositions. In this chapter we examine how the eclectic and changing nature of genres on the Web brought about a reconceptualizing and reorienting of our own expectations about teaching and learning writing, focusing on ways in which students adapted their writing for the Web and on the ways in which we tried (not always successfully) to adapt our approaches to the learning and teaching of Web genres. The complications we encountered in our teaching spring from a variety of sources. First, there are the institutional pressures of academic discourses and their intersections with non-academic discourses. Second, the Web itself is a vast and heterogeneous space, incorporating many different textual forms from which teachers and students might construct radically differing generic conceptions of Web pages.

The ways teachers and students work with Web genres are complicated by the diverse and often conflicting ways that Web pages have been defined and categorized. Just as print-based genres have been sometimes categorized by form alone, Web genres are sometimes described according to the technical aspects of sites, such as the link structures used or the coding or multimedia employed. For example, in an analysis of the research paper genre and its move to hypertext and the Web, Wendy Warren Austin classifies argumentative hypertext and Web genres by link structures, ranging from “primitive” to “true hypertext” (2001). Austin’s classification of a Web genre based on link structures carries over from discussions of hypertext, a broad textual category of which Web sites are

frequently seen as a subcategory (Golson 1999; Landow 1991, 1994a; Norton, Zimmerman, and Lindeman 1999). To take a more popular example, some of the more than thirty categories of sites listed on Cool Home Pages (<http://www.coolhomepages.com>) include "Audio/Sound," "CSS & DHTML," and "Flash," thereby focusing at least some attention on the technologies associated with the sites.

Teachers and students who work with Web genres must take into account the technical and structural composition of Web sites, because all sites share certain technical characteristics: they are designed to be read on-screen, they have the potential to incorporate graphics and sound, and they have the potential for linking. We also acknowledge the importance of including technical considerations in understandings of genre because, as Marcy Bauman has noted about working with writers new to the Web, "it becomes difficult to tell when literacy ends and technological proficiency begins" (1999, 279). But technical and formal aspects of Web sites are only one component of understanding Web genres.

Another component of genre on the Web is the content of the sites. Cool Home Pages includes other categories such as "Sports," "Corporate," "Travel," "Kids," "News," and "Personal." But simply calling something a personal home page or news site is an inadequate descriptor of genre, for a number of reasons. First, even within a genre that appears to be quite clearly defined according to content, there is an inevitably a great deal of rhetorical variation, as Anne Wysocki demonstrates in her analysis of two CD-ROMs of museum art collections (2001). Similarly, Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan, in their analysis of women's visual representations on the Web, show that these representations are complicated by such factors as race, age, class, technical capabilities, sexual orientation, and professional status (1999). Given the complexity of genres on the Web, we feel it's important to develop in ourselves and in our students an understanding of genre that accounts for the interrelationships of form, content, context, and social purposes. In short, teachers must understand the heterogeneity of documents on the World Wide Web and the heterogeneity of possible responses to those documents, and maintain such an understanding in incorporating Web-based assignments into composition curricula. As instructors, our attempts to foster a contextual awareness of the workings of Web genres may sometimes not have the same results as our attempts to foster a contextual awareness of the workings of print genres, particularly because students' responses to assignments may often foreground previously unanticipated generic factors. Web pages as a genre

preexist and transcend the classrooms into which they are incorporated as writing assignments, and so students often import nonacademic Web discourses into concrete, visible, and useful interactions with academic literacies. In our teaching, we were each surprised by Web discourses used by students that were unfamiliar to us.

We are both graduate students at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where we teach first-year composition courses in the writing program. The goals of the University of Massachusetts first-year composition course include that students “write for various audiences and purposes,” “use various kinds of thinking and discourses,” and revise their writing in “substantive ways” (University of Massachusetts 2002). While instructors are given some latitude in how to meet these goals, there are set essay assignments all instructors must include in the five-essay semester: a close, sustained engagement with a published essay, an essay incorporating library research, and an end-of-the-semester writer’s retrospective.

Like all first-year composition instructors in the fall of 2000, we received at our orientation session Peter Elbow’s “The Spirit and the Letter of the Writing Program” (2000), in which the goals for the course were explained. “The course is about the essay; it’s called ‘College Writing.’ True, the goal of the course is not *only* academic writing, and the official description announces explicitly that the course is also meant to help students use writing in the rest of their lives during college, and after college too. Nevertheless, the most obvious purpose of the course is to help them do the writing they will need to do for other University faculty.”

While we both incorporated Web-based writing assignments into our classes (with the full knowledge and support of the faculty and administrators in the program), we still sometimes felt pressure to ensure that the Web sites students created were somehow equivalent to an essay. The institutional pressure we felt for essay equivalence affected how each of us went about teaching and responding to sites and to the genres of the sites that our students created, as we will each explain in the subsequent sections.

Our reflections are drawn from a study we each conducted in spring 2002 (Mike’s and Heidi’s courses) and fall 2003 (Mike’s course). Besides obtaining students’ consent to keep and reproduce digital copies of their sites and their writings about their Web sites, we kept teaching journals and interviewed each other’s students (face-to-face and via e-mail) about their experiences creating their Web sites.

As we will show in the following sections, the teaching and learning of Web genres are complicated both by the evolving heterogeneous nature

of genres on the Web and by the differing notions we and our students hold about what Web writing entails. Mike will focus upon how differing conceptions of linking shaped students' and his own approaches to Web compositions, particularly in relation to understandings of essayistic literacy. Heidi will focus on the commercial discourses that shaped students' personal representations on the Web, making explicit connections between students' sites and the corporate models from which they worked. Although we each discuss individual students working on specific assignments in specific contexts, we feel that the disjunctions that occurred in our two classes between students' approaches to Web genres and our own approaches indicate issues that instructors should consider when incorporating Web assignments into composition curricula.

MIKE'S ACCOUNT: THE INTERSECTIONS OF INSIDER KNOWLEDGE AND ESSAYISTIC LITERACY

I introduced Web page instruction as a component of my writing assignments in the spring semester of 2002. I asked students to plan their third essay, a persuasive essay, as a multipage Web site incorporating links and graphics. Students made an initial paper plan for the site and then used Macromedia's Dreamweaver (a visual HTML editor and Web development application with powerful file management capabilities) to compose a multilinear Web site with at least four separate pages addressing a relevant and contemporary issue that was open to debate and could be argued on the basis of personal expertise and authority to an audience who needed to be convinced. The Web sites that students composed based on these requirements seemed to me to be largely successful as argumentative essays, although they did not closely resemble any documents I had seen in my five years of navigating the Web.

The following semester, in fall 2002, I approached matters differently. For a number of reasons, I moved from using Dreamweaver to teaching students HTML and having them edit their Web pages with a free, bare-bones text editor.¹ I began teaching HTML early in the semester and had students work with it in very small increments (first the concept of HTML tags, then the basic structure of an HTML document, then basic text-formatting tags, and so on), which were worked into each of their essay assignments. By the time we got to the fourth essay, students knew how to include links, tables, images, and complicated formatting in their Web pages. The fourth essay, like the third essay in the previous semester, was a persuasive essay; however, the assignment required students to use library

and Internet sources, and document those sources on a multipage Web site, in support of their arguments. The planning stages for this essay were more complicated than they had been for the previous semester's third essay: students first composed annotated bibliographies and loose textual plans for their essays, and then drew crayon-and-marker visual representations of how they wanted their pages to look, as well as paper "maps" of their sites, to which their bibliographies and plans were indexed. Finally, students spent several class sessions synthesizing all these elements into their Web sites, with the more technically proficient students serving as peer coaches for their classmates.

Perhaps because the assignments in both semesters were nearly congruent—persuasive essays with multiple pages, links, and graphics, planned as Web documents from the outset—the documents that students produced in both semesters held some similar characteristics: sophisticated arguments that seemed to reflect what Douglas Hesse has called an "essayistic literacy" rather than a rhetoric more native to the Web (1999). In the most extreme cases, the essays felt alien to the medium in which I read them, as if their words were straitjacketed by the requirements of the assignment. In this section, I focus on two students, Ken and Bill—Ken from the spring semester, and Bill from the fall—to describe the disjunctions created by our differing expectations about the conventions of essays and the World Wide Web.

As many have argued, links and linking structures are the defining features of hypertext (Burbules 1998; DeWitt 1999; Golson 1999; Joyce 1995; Landow 1991, 1994a, 1997). Charles Moran and Anne Herrington have recently echoed this contention, suggesting again that the defining characteristics of hypertext documents, including Web pages, "are the internal and external links" (2002, 247). While it is useful to point out the existence of links as a characteristic that defines hypertext as a genre, as Moran and Herrington themselves suggest, looking at hypertext as a genre is looking from far too broad a perspective to be at all useful. It may be more helpful to examine what those links *do*, since, as Nicholas Burbules points out, "all links are not the same" (1998, 104).

George Landow (1991, 1994b, 1997), Michael Joyce (1995), David Kolb (1994), and others have focused considerable attention on concerns of unilinearity versus multilinearity in hypertext documents, and on understanding how the number of relationships any hypertext document is linked into (and its location among other documents) affects its meaning. Moran and Herrington use the adjectives "internal" and "external" to

focus attention on where a document's links lead (2002). Burbules, in his argument "that selecting and following any particular line of association between distinct textual points involves an interpretation of the nature of the association this link implies," examines the relationships of rhetorical signification that links set up between documents (1998, 104).

I find all three of these perspectives on linking useful in attempting to understand the generic qualities of the Web sites students produced in the sections of College Writing I taught in spring and fall 2002. Burbules constructs what is perhaps the most systematic taxonomy of types of linking, and I would add to his point the contention that students in the sections I taught often interpreted the nature of link associations differently from the ways I did. I would also suggest that some of Burbules's characterizations obscure more than they illuminate, particularly the ways he lists links that enact the logic of cause and effect as being analogous to those that enact the logic of sequence, or, to quote Burbules, "Links that suggest 'this *and then* that' or 'this *because of* that'" (1998, 115). As I will show, my students were quite aware of the considerable difference between these two forms of linking, even if they might not have known the terms *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*.

These terms themselves, however, have been deployed in varying and sometimes conflicting ways in discussions of hypertext, by writers such as Marilyn Cooper (1999), Michael Joyce (1995), Richard Lanham (1993), and Jane Yellowlees Douglas (1998). Doug Brent goes so far as to assert that "hypertext . . . privileges infinite hypotaxis rather than parataxis" (1997), an assertion that I would strongly disagree with: perhaps, then, some clarifications and definitions are in order. Richard Lanham opposes hypotaxis to the "coordinate, rather than a subordinate, construction" of parataxis (1991, 108); Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca go further, and explain that hypotaxis "establishes precise connections between the elements of discourse," whereas parataxis is "characterized by the absence of precise connections between the parts" (1969, 157), with the emphasis being on the degree of precision. Hypotaxis, they continue, "controls the reader, forces him to see particular relationships, restricts the interpretations he may consider, and takes its inspiration from well-constructed legal reasoning" (158). Hypotaxis, in other words, is the explicit, rigorous, and carefully subordinated language of argument; the mode of connection favored, to my mind, by conventional essayistic literacy. As Douglas Hesse remarks, "One of the main responsibilities of the essayist is to point—at books, ideas, experiences, people, and so on. But

essayists interpret their pointing” (1999, 44). Links on student Web pages can interpret their pointing, or they can simply point, and this distinction constitutes one of the generic qualities of Web pages.

Furthermore, hypotaxis and parataxis require different reading strategies. While the subordination of hypotaxis is highly explicit, it requires considerable attention to work through, as anyone who has read Samuel Johnson or Michel Foucault will attest. The “and/and/and” of parataxis is easier to digest, and has much more in common with the quick multipage browse of the Web, or what Burbules refers to as the “phenomenological orientation” of surfing (1998, 108).² Many students in the spring and fall 2003 sections I taught remarked that they had been using the World Wide Web since junior high school, and I believe, therefore, that their in-school understandings of Web page genres were strongly affected by their out-of-school understandings of Web page genres. This was particularly evident in many students’ complaints in interviews that reading a sustained argument on a single Web page was unacceptably difficult. At the same time, when I would refer to “cohesion” and “unity” in my comments on their other essays, I was privileging precisely those sorts of sustained arguments; the same holds true for Moran and Herrington’s suggesting “coherence” and “focus” as evaluative criteria for hypertext (2002, 250-51). Like me, students construct their notions of genre from texts, both print and Web, that they read: as Burbules suggests, “Reading is a practice, and as such it partakes of the contexts and social relations in which it takes place; significant differences in those contexts and relations alter the practice” (1998, 102).

Out of all the essays I received in the spring of 2002, I would argue that Ken’s was the most influenced by out-of-school understandings of Web page genres. Ken, a self-described novice at making Web pages, produced a site that relied extensively on visual rhetoric and on humorous animated graphics in particular to supplement his explicitly audience-conscious informal tone. His site, “Don’t Drink to Excess, Know Your Limit,” begins not with text, but with two clipart pictures captioned “Before” and “After,” the “Before” picture showing a smiling, cheering group of attractive college-age men and women at a bar with beer steins and wine glasses in hand, and the “After” picture a chiaroscuro rendering of a man sitting slumped on the edge of a bed, his face hidden, with his head in one hand and a bottle in the other. The site is divided into seven topical sections, with the links to all sections available at the bottom of each page. Each page contains a brief paragraph or two of text, frequently

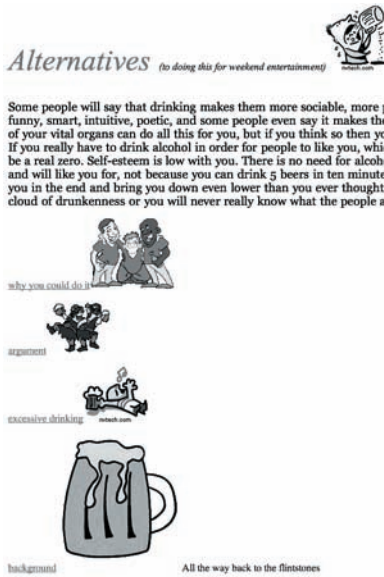


Figure 1: The concluding page of Ken's site

followed by a series of alcohol- or drunkenness-related animated graphics interspersed with sentences commenting upon or illustrated by the graphics (see figure 1).

Ken's site contains no external links; however, according to Ken, the site's layout, tone, and use of graphics imitate the UMassDrunks Web site (<http://www.umassdrunks.com/>).³ Although I was not familiar then with UMassDrunks, many of Ken's classmates caught the reference: the UMassDrunks site (which included polls and games celebrating intoxication, a "party post" bulletin board, and a frequently updated gallery of photographs taken of and by drunk undergraduates) was highly popular with students. Ken's site, with its message urging students *not* to overindulge and its relaxed, forthright language, served as a highly effective parody of the UMassDrunks site, and carried an implicit exhortation to view its own graphics (as well as the gallery at UMassDrunks) as cautionary rather than celebratory.

While Ken's use of graphics causes the vertical length of many of his pages to violate Jakob Nielsen's no-scroll rule (1996), the chunks of text on each page are quite brief and easily scanned. His links, isolated at the bottom of each page and often separated from the page's main body text by one or more graphics, stand on their own without any indication (aside from the brief titles of the pages to which they link) of how they

might be subordinated to the argument. I would thus characterize them as paratactic. Organized by topic, with links to every other page at the bottom of each page, the essay is multilinear in nature; the reader can take any route through Ken's site he or she desires.

Despite his essay's apparent multilinearity, Ken argued for the importance of what he called "flow." According to Ken, "If you just have a series of links that aren't really coordinated, or they don't go in order, then people are going to look at your essay and say, 'This isn't related to what I was just reading. So why am I reading this now; why aren't I reading this later?'" Ken pointed out that his pages were intended to be read in the vertical order in which they were linked at the bottom of each page, but he noted that he also tried to make sure that the pages could be read in any order. This is achieved by the frequent repetition of various forms of the word "drink" and the consistent use of humorous graphics and a casual, honest, witty, and knowing tone. Still, each of the pages stands well on its own, to the point where the site seems to comprise seven arguments against drinking too much. This is not to say that the site is not persuasive: by my standards, and the standards of Ken's classmates, it was highly persuasive. Rather, the site relies on a combination of factors that seem to stand in direct contrariety to the syllogistic reasoning and linear progression of thought that I typically associate with argumentation.

Bill's Web site, composed in the fall semester of 2003, relied on a much more linear, progressive mode of argumentation. His essay argues that the guidelines set down by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) regarding explicit content in music are poorly thought out and should be either ignored or revised. The essay, after its introduction (a brief paragraph of text, followed by a collage of graphics), is divided into three main pages, labeled I, II, and III, and contains in-text links to other internal and external pages (see figure 2). The labels for his pages indicate that his essay progresses in a highly linear fashion, with each succeeding page relying on the arguments established on previous pages. In this sense, Bill's essay follows a mode of argumentation that seems to me to be much closer to the mode of conventional print-based essays.

Bill suggested that, while the assignment explicitly required multiple pages, the fact that he divided his essay into sections was also pragmatic: "Breaking it down makes it easier to think about. Say I have three sections with three points apiece. It's easier to think about than to discuss these nine things. It makes more sense to me to break it down." Echoing Jakob Nielsen (1996), Bill pointed out: "You get bored if you're scrolling down and down and down and down," and suggested that "you can't write big

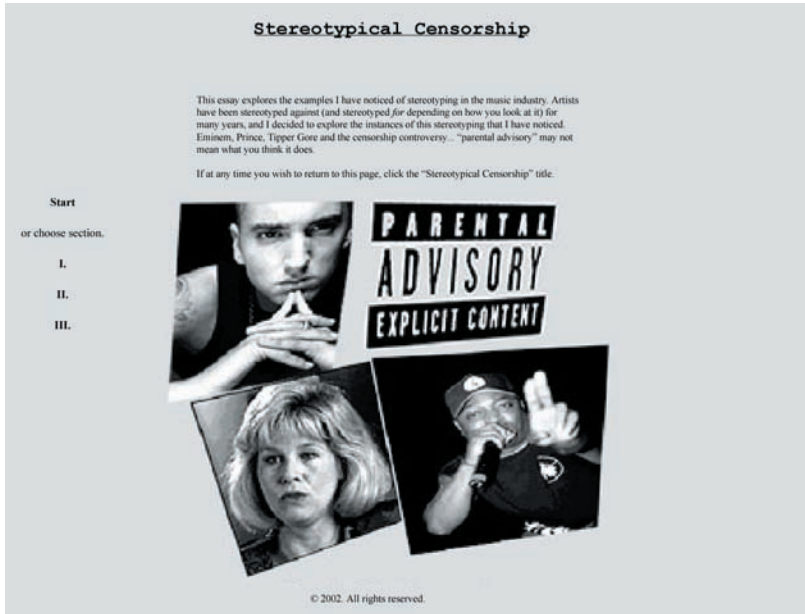


Figure 2: Bill's introductory page

long descriptions and all this stuff and have your Web page go on for like eighteen pages. It just doesn't work." The links between the pages of Bill's essay appear, in apparent accordance with what seems to be a Web convention, on the left side of his text.

However, Bill also includes both internal and external links within the text of his paragraphs to material somehow supplementary to his argument, to citations, or to examples that often resisted or violated what I would think of as appropriate material for an essay. Clicking on the underlined title of the controversial gangsta rap song "Fuck tha Police," for example, plays an audio file of the song. I found this a fascinating strategy: while the song is clearly subordinated, hypotactically, to the argument of the essay, the audio file makes Bill's point far more forcefully than any textual example could have. Bill could have included a portion of the song's lyrics in text, which are themselves quite forceful:

To the police I'm sayin fuck you punk
 Readin my rights and shit, it's all junk
 Pullin out a silly club, so you stand
 With a fake assed badge and a gun in your hand
 But take off the gun so you can see what's up
 And we'll go at it punk, I'ma fuck you up. (N.W.A. 1989)

But Bill's choice to include the song itself—its crisp beats, the sampled cymbal and funk guitar, MC Ren's aggressive snarl—places the example next to that which it exemplifies. Rather than having the language of his essay "tame" his example, it borrows from its power. In this sense, Bill's remark that "If I were going to do a personal narrative, I'd want to stick pictures of my friends, little links to [my hometown]," and his incorporation of the song, indicate that Web pages lend themselves to the concrete and particular.

Ken's and Bill's essays used links in radically different ways. The paratactic linking style of Ken's essay worked against my expectations of how an argument ought to work, and in fact I initially missed what was perhaps the most important component of Ken's argument: the parodic echo of the UMassDrunks site. Bill's essay was more linear and progressive, and his hypotactically linked examples also violated my expectations about arguments. However, in both cases, these were the most successful components of their essays: Ken's and Bill's Web pages were least convincing when they followed the conventions of Hesse's "essayistic literacy"—Bill's explicit, progressive, and dense initial prose describing the workings of the RIAA; Ken's attempt to tie his seven arguments together in an over-explained conclusion—and most convincing when they incorporated "unauthorized" modes of argumentation, or what Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel call "insider knowledge" (2000).

Ken's and Bill's "insider knowledge" was knowledge about how discourse works on the World Wide Web, and it intersected in problematic ways with their positions as students in a classroom environment where they had already written several essays. Ken and Bill both had considerable experience navigating the Web, and both reported an understanding of the variety of genres that exist on the Web. As Moran and Herrington point out, "Students know this territory perhaps better than we do" (2002, 247), but they also know it *differently*. I was unfamiliar with UMassDrunks, and so missed the point of Ken's site; a site that Bill reported visiting on a daily basis, gamespot.com (<http://www.gamespot.com>), was one that I knew nothing about. At the same time, I would suspect that the number of undergraduates who visit *Arts and Letters Daily* (<http://aldaily.com>), the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>), or the *New York Review of Books* (<http://nybooks.com>) is relatively slight. My students do not read the same sites that I do, and so have notions about the generic conventions of Web sites that are different from mine—and I would suggest that *Arts and Letters Daily*, the *Chronicle*,

and the *New York Review of Books* are all sites that favor Hesse's "essayistic literacy."

As teachers we need to understand that students will likely come into our classrooms holding much more familiarity with Web genres than they hold with Hesse's "essayistic literacy," and that any documents students produce will be influenced by this familiarity. Such an understanding is complicated by the fact that Web pages have a very brief and rapidly evolving history of generic characteristics. Web genres are overdetermined, shaped by too many different factors for us to be able to point to any one as the single determining factor. However, focusing on the way students use links, and the way those links position students and their Web pages within a social network, can help teachers to understand the ways in which students perceive their own positions. Heidi, in the next section, addresses the ways in which those perceptions play out within the commercialized context of the Web.

HEIDI'S ACCOUNT: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION


For the past two years I have included a Web assignment in the College Writing sections I teach. Most semesters I have students convert an argumentative essay written about a current issue and for a particular audience into a Web site, with the guidelines being that students include multiple pages, incorporate images, develop link structures, and substantially revise their verbal text. In the process we discuss various design approaches to Web composition and rhetorical issues involved with the use of images, links, colors, text, and, for more technologically advanced students, sound and movement on Web sites. While this converting of an essay works well, particularly for students who have never made a Web site before and in the context of a course whose primary curricular focus is on print-based essays, in spring 2002, responding to numerous requests by students, I modified the assignment guidelines. Instead of stipulating that students convert an essay I gave them the option to compose something new for their Web sites.

Half of the twenty students chose to convert their argument essays, composing sites on such issues as the speed skating controversy at the Salt Lake Olympics, the proposed demolition of Fenway Park, and the dropout rate among UMass college students. Half of the students, however, chose to focus their sites upon topics they had not written about before in the class—at least not directly—thus creating what Billie Jones calls

“native hypertexts” (2001) and what I prefer to call *Web-directed compositions*, which are composed exclusively for the Web. Of my students who chose to make new sites, most created what can broadly be categorized as personal sites, of which there are innumerable genres and subgenres evolving on the Web. One such genre is what Jay David Bolter identifies as the “gift page or site” (2001, 119), which is a site composed to be given to others, celebrating not only the individual(s) to whom the page is directed, but often the person creating the site as well. A number of students’ sites from this class can be categorized within this gift genre. For example, one student dedicated her site to her younger brother; another student made a site about and for her friends at college.

Working with students as they composed these gift sites raised a number of issues for me that I had not encountered (or at least had not encountered as frequently) in previous semesters, including the dominance of visual over alphabetic imagery and the “fit” of these personal sites in the first-year composition curriculum. For my discussion here, however, I will focus on students’ self-representations and my belated realizations of (1) the impact of commercialization upon my students’ writing for the Web; and (2) the importance that an instructor learn as much as possible about the Web genres with which students are familiar and upon which they draw when composing their sites in order to engage students more critically with the rhetorical choices they make in their compositions.

In previous semesters when students converted essays into Web sites, they seldom made separate pages dedicated to explicit self-representation; most instead opted for a few sentences describing themselves at the bottom of the main index page or an e-mail link. I realize now that my teaching of composing for the Web focused on issues of self-representation primarily in relation to how design choices can build ethos, but I seldom discussed issues of explicit self-representation beyond what students might want to include on their index page. So when conferencing with students on earlier drafts of Web-directed compositions, I was surprised at the numerous pages with such titles as “About Me” or “Who I Am.” Given that personal Web sites are so common on the Web, I should not have been surprised by these pages, but I think I was because I had not encountered before such explicit representations of self in Web sites composed in the context of a composition classroom. What also surprised me—and eventually disturbed me—about these personal pages was the number of students who used lists to describe themselves.⁴

Jennifer


Height: 5' 3"
 Weight: Again, like a girl is going to willingly give out her weight
 Eyes: Dark brown
 Hair: Dark blonde (I just dyed it strawberry blonde though)
 High school: T. Regional Junior/ Senior High School
 Year of Graduation: 2001
 College: University of Massachusetts Amherst
 Year of Graduation: 2005

Likes:
 Sports: (To play) Softball/ Baseball, Street Hockey, Tackle Football, Basketball (To watch) Baseball/ Softball, Hockey, Equestrian, Football (occasionally)
 Hobbies: Going to the beach, Hanging out with my friends, Rollerblading, Stargazing, Biking (occasionally), Being outside, Photography, Horseback riding

Dislikes:
 Sports: (To play) Soccer, Golf (To watch) Racing, Golf
 Hobbies: Shopping, School, Desk work (job wise)

Favorite:
 Food: Chinese
 Music: Almost anything
 Movie: I like way to many to pick just one
 Car: Not sure (as long as it's a stick-shift)
 Author: J.R.R Tolkien, Terry Brooks, JK Rowling

Figure 3: Jennifer's section of her "Random Information" page

Jennifer, the first of two students I will focus on here, created a site titled "My Living Reflection" about her and her sister's experiences growing up as identical twins. As she explained in a reflective letter about her site, "I hope that [my sister] will enjoy the site. . . . I hope that anyone else who reads this site will see how twins are and aren't alike." Although her approach to writing this Web-directed composition was, as she explained, "kind of like an essay with pictures"—and indeed many of her pages are dominated by paragraphs of verbal text arranged with numerous images, creating an effect much like what Greg Wickliff and Kathleen Yancey call an "illustrated essay" (2001, 178)—her site included one page that is distinctly non-essay-like. She titled this page "Random Information" and it comprises lists of her and her sister's personal statistics, the activities each enjoys, and their favorite cars, food, movies, and books (see figure 3).⁵

I initially looked at this page with its list of likes and dislikes and its senior photos and thought about high school yearbooks, and I surmised that Jennifer was remediating a familiar print-based genre for the Web (Bolter 2001; Bolter and Grusin 1999). However, what I was eventually to learn was that Jennifer was not drawing—at least not consciously—from print-based genres, but, more problematically (I think), from commercialized Web-based genres.

Unfortunately I was not able to ask Jennifer about this page during a conference in the early drafting stages because at that point she had not constructed it. I first saw it at the final draft, where in a reflective letter about the process of composing her site, she wrote: "I like the Random Information page best" because "it was a lot of fun to compare and

contrast what we like to do.” I find it interesting that what Jennifer most liked about her site was what I least liked. Besides being bothered with the whole height/weight/eyes description, I also found the page an odd contrast to the rich detail, both visual and verbal, on the other pages. In her interview after the course was over, Jennifer explained: “Originally I was going to write a little essay about what we like to do and how we’re different, but [my sister] said why not have a bio profile?” I have to admit that looking at the list above, I find part of me (the print-based English teacher who only in the past few years has moved to working with the Web and who teaches in a program that emphasizes the essay) missing that “little essay,” a feeling that intensified once I learned what a bio profile is.

Briefly—I will describe in more detail below—bio profiles are lists of personal information that people are required to submit to commercial host sites such as AsianAvenue (<http://www.asianavenue.com>) or GeoCities (<http://geocities.com>), and they form the opening page of the “free” personal home pages people create at these Web hosting companies.

I first learned where to begin looking for bio profiles from another student, Kathy, who created what she described as a “couples site” about her boyfriend and their relationship. Judging from Kathy’s description of her site, I surmise that couples sites form another genre of gift sites, serving many of the same social purposes. In her reflective letter accompanying her finished draft, Kathy explained (as I asked all students to do) the purpose(s) and audience(s) for her site: “My whole purpose of this Website is to give myself a chance to expand ourselves and was a gift for my boyfriend. . . . I hope after observing my whole Web page, he can have in mind that no matter how hard it is in life that I will always be there for him. . . . My main audience is, of course, my boyfriend. But also to those young adults or teenagers who may wander around surfing the net interested in couples’ relationships.”

Until I spoke with Kathy and viewed her site, I had no idea that couples sites existed on the Web. Kathy said she goes to them a lot to read about how other couples met and what they do together. From my perusal of some couples sites (do a Web search for “how we met” to see some), I realize that Kathy’s site, while problematic for first-year composition (how many college papers are written for one’s boyfriend?), is crafted solidly within the couples genre, and Kathy employed the social and textual conventions of the genre well—from the twinkling stars in the background of her pages to the “Him,” “Her,” and “Our” pages, and the many photos of her and her boyfriend together.⁶



Figure 4: Kathy's "Her" page

On both the "Him" page and the "Her" pages, of which I focus on the latter (see figure 4), Kathy had many links, including links to her online journal entries and to pages of more photos. She included photos of herself, her boyfriend, her friends, the Louis Vuitton purse she owns, and the Mazda car she drives. In the center of the page Kathy inserted a table listing information about her, categorized by such topics as age, nationality, occupation, and likes and dislikes.

When Kathy was asked in a postcourse e-mail interview "Did you have any other types of sites in mind when you were planning your pages?" she replied, "Actually, I do have another site in mind while planning my page. This site is the site I have shown already, www.asianavenue.com. I thought I could use some of the ideas I have on this page for the page in class." When I read her interview response, I remembered that in an in-class writing prior to working on Web pages (in which I asked students to write about their previous experiences with Web writing and their feelings about the upcoming Web assignment), Kathy mentioned that she had built a site on AsianAvenue, a point I originally missed following up on during class. My follow-up exploration of the profiles used on Web hosting services such as AsianAvenue and GeoCities heightened my concern about students' use of lists to describe themselves and made me regret the missed teaching and learning opportunities centered around students' appropriation of the generic features (and thus some of the social functions) of profiles.

Profiles, as I mentioned, are lists of required personal information that individuals fill out upon registering to receive access to Web space where they can then post a “free” personal site (see figure 5). While the exact personal information gathered in these profiles varies by company, in general they cover information such as “your birthday, city where you live, hobbies, and interests” (AsianAvenue) and “name, email address, birth date, gender, zip code, industry, and personal interests” (Yahoo, which owns and operates GeoCities). In user agreements and privacy policies, the Web hosting companies explicitly state that “Profile information will be used to create personalized content, service, and advertise [*sic*] on the Service. AsianAvenue.com may also use your profile to generate aggregate reports and market research” (AsianAvenue) and that such information will be used “to customize the advertising and consumer requests for products and services, improve our services, conduct research, and provide reporting for internal and external clients” (Yahoo). However, I wonder how many people, especially teenagers and young adults, actually read the companies’ policies and thus can contextualize more fully the factors influencing the lists of personal information that dominate the portal pages of individual sites.

I see these lists like the one in figure 5 of likes, interests, and hobbies and then return to my students’ pages, and I no longer see a high school yearbook format, which is how I first read Jennifer’s and Kathy’s lists, but rather a reduction of identity and self-presentation for marketers, advertisers, and other “internal and external clients,” to use Yahoo’s obfuscating phrase. Profiles are a feature of personal Web pages created for marketing purposes, and it disturbs me that this translation of identity into commercially viable categories seems to have been internalized by students who then, in representing themselves through lists, perpetuate their own commodification.

The dislocations created by moving writing and the teaching and learning of writing to the Web exposed more fully for me the ways in which students bring modes of expression shaped by corporate culture into the classroom and into both their print-based and Web-directed compositions. The commercialization of the Web is so pervasive, inducing what Michael Joyce calls a “commercial glaze” (1995, 167), that no matter what genre students write in for the Web, instructors need to be prepared to discuss more fully with students the ways in which their prior experiences reading the Web shape their approaches and their ideas for the sites they compose. Although in a subsequent semester of College Writing I

The screenshot shows a web page titled "Christinee's Scribble Pad" with a navigation bar containing "christinee22: reviews • events • subscribe!". Below the navigation bar is a search bar for "xanga" and a "Go!" button. The main content area is divided into a left sidebar and a main post area.

Left Sidebar:

- christinee22
- view entire profile
- view my guestbook
-
- Real Name: christinee22
- Birthdate: 6/22/1982
- Gender: Female
- Location: New Jersey
- Occupation: Student
- Industry: Education/Research
- Hobbies: looking back to , looking forward to
- Website: Click Here
- Email: [redacted]
- Stats
- Member since: 3/29/2002
- Join a Blog
- Subscribe to christinee22
- Get trial subscription
- reokim

Main Post Area:

You Are Here: christinee22

Saturday, October 11, 2003

Jason Mraz was so HOT 🤩🤩
DROOL

I'm determined to find a man with those vocal cords...!!.. or is that too much to ask DAMNIT
DAMNITDAMNITDAMNITDAMNITDAMNIT
3:11 AM • 8 replies • 5 comments • email it

Wednesday, October 08, 2003

Currently Playing: *Elisbank - 05- SHUT UP*

"I dedicate this song to you"

Shutup Shutup Shutup Shutup Shutup
1:15 AM • 6 replies • 4 comments • email it

Sunday, October 05, 2003

Currently Playing: *Remedy II.Wool.Worry*

Jason Mraz concert this Thursday 🤩
I don't know his songs but this better be worth my 25 precious bucks
"SCORE" !

okay so i'm gonna get myself pumped up by bustin his songs loud on my winamp every morning til thursday! yeaaa- n hes going in my mp3 plays playaa this must be working already
10:07 PM • 18 replies • 2 comments • email it

Figure 5. A portal for a personal page hosted by a commercial site

returned to having students convert an argumentative essay for the Web, I also included assignments focused on more explicit analysis of Web-based genres, including the rhetorical structuring of various sites students identified as ones they frequently visited and, of course, personal sites at Web hosting services like GeoCities.⁷ My goal is to ensure that students look at the rhetorical constructions of Web sites, rather than through them (Lanham 1993, 72–83) in order that students may pay attention to how a site's generic features position them and thus contribute to what is said, how, in what context, and to whom. Only by engaging students and ourselves in ongoing discussions of the evolving Internet genres will we be adequately prepared to help them compose for the Web.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING WEB GENRES

While we have discussed the teaching of Web sites in just two instances in two specific contexts, we both feel that our experiences indicate significant issues for instructors to consider when incorporating Web-directed compositions into course curricula.

1. *We should acknowledge students' expertise in understanding, navigating, and composing in Web genres while also sharing our own expertise in analyzing and understanding genres.* In the attempts we both made to bring Web assignments into our classrooms (and in the turmoil of teaching students how to do such things as change background colors, design layouts, insert

images, format text, create links, manage files, and so on), we discovered that we had missed opportunities to engage with students in critical discussions of how Web genres get constructed, circulated, accepted, and altered. So, too, we discovered that we had overlooked students' cultural expertise with the Web, an expertise that helped them to produce rich, nuanced, and rhetorically sophisticated documents, and an expertise that could have helped us to earlier and more completely understand the complex nature of Web genres. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe point out that because so many instructors today "have come of age in a print generation . . . we often find ourselves casting about for effective ways to educate students for a world with which we ourselves are unfamiliar—and about which we remain uncertain" (1999b, 3). Yet even if we are unfamiliar with the evolving Web genres that influence our students' compositions—even if we don't have sites hosted at GeoCities or visit student-oriented sites like UMassDrunks—we do possess the critical, rhetorical, and theoretical knowledge to facilitate students' analyses of both the Web sites they visit and the Web sites they create.

2. *We should cultivate an awareness of and receptivity to hybrid, changing genres both in ourselves and in our students.* Both of our experiences have demonstrated the problems inherent in attempting to narrowly categorize Web texts by an attention to link structures, content, or technical considerations. We would argue for an understanding of Web texts that recognizes their evolving and hybrid nature, particularly because of the rapidly changing nature of the Web. With the Web even more so than with print-based genres, we find the perspective of Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis instructive: "As genre theory evolves, however, it becomes obvious that more and more text is generically problematic. To describe this, we need to move beyond categorizations of the generic, towards using genre as an analytical tool for engaging with . . . multigeneric, intergeneric and heteroglossic texts (1993a, 16)."

Employing genre as an analytical tool requires that we not only recognize the multigeneric nature of Web texts, but also develop strategies for helping students—and ourselves—identify and analyze the origins of our frequently differing conceptions of Web genres. The changing nature of the Web only serves to heighten the exigency of asking such basic questions as:

- What is the purpose of your site?
- For whom is it composed?

- Are you modeling your site—or features of your site—on other sites you have seen on the Web? What do you think of the values and power relations associated with those sites?
- What design decisions (e.g., links, graphics, sound, backgrounds, font, layout, color) have you made to achieve your purpose for your particular audience(s)? What sorts of texts, Web and print, influenced those decisions?
- If you were to categorize your site by genre, into what genre(s) would you say it fits?

These apparently fundamental questions take on new nuance when considered in relation to the Web. Addressing such questions in our classrooms can increase both students' and our own understandings of the diverse factors shaping genre expression and evolution.

But more than classroom inquiry is needed. We also need, as Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2000) remark, “to get beyond research/study of familiar genres.” We particularly need to investigate the hybrid nature of Web genres using a variety of methodological and theoretical frames and researching a variety of contexts. In short, we need more knowledge to better understand and to better teach writing on and for the Web.

3. *We should foster awareness of the multiple, overlapping influences on the composition of Web texts.* First, and perhaps most obviously, the technology upon which the Web is based profoundly influences the texts and thus the genres of Web-directed compositions. For example, bandwidth (the amount of information that a user's link to the Internet can handle per unit of time) determines how quickly or slowly a user can send or receive files.⁸ Our students, working with the university's broad bandwidth, often composed pages that, when they looked at them at home on dial-up connections, took “forever” to load. Some students decided to revise their pages to make them more accessible to lower bandwidth connections, while other students were less concerned with accessibility and more concerned with having flashing animations and including a large number of images.

Second, Web authors' access to and familiarity with various software resources profoundly shape the sites they create. Whether a Web site contains only text; text and static images; or text, static images, sound, and visual animations shapes the positions and interactions of readers and writers. Web sites that include sophisticated multimedia elements require a great deal of knowledge to create using code, but authors with relatively

little Web experience can use visual HTML editors such as Macromedia's Dreamweaver to include multimedia elements in their texts. As writers incorporate more multimedia elements into their Web compositions, the nature of writing changes, and as teachers we need to be prepared for this.

Third, instructors need to acknowledge the institutional considerations shaping the teaching and academic expectations of Web assignments. As we both have discussed, we should have acknowledged further the pressures we felt to ensure that students' sites were equivalent to essays, and we should have recognized more fully that students' goals for their Web sites did not often align with our goals. Unlike their print-based essays (which, despite our best efforts, students still often saw as being for the teacher), students' Web sites were frequently directed to an audience outside the classroom. Although we were very much aware of the context of College Writing, many students bypassed considerations of this context altogether. Working within a curriculum highly focused upon print-based essays led us to impose constraints upon Web assignments and thus upon how we responded to and evaluated students' Web compositions, and such constraints and responses may have been simply inappropriate to the online genres students created.

CONCLUSIONS

Students, when composing Web documents, often draw their primary influences from the Web; as obvious as such a statement may seem, our experiences indicate that it bears repeating. Because of the millions and millions of pages on the Web, and with more being added every moment, each person can explore only a small portion of the Web. For these reasons, individual students will bring unique perceptions of Web genres to the classroom, perceptions perhaps even more idiosyncratic than those we may associate with print genres. Furthermore, the Web is just as saturated with influences and interests—corporate, commercial, or otherwise—as the rest of our culture. These influences explicitly and implicitly shape how individuals read and write online, and we believe it is essential that instructors and students situate individual approaches to Web composition within the broader contexts of these influences.

Our attention to the changing nature of the Web and its association with technological and corporate influences can usefully foreground the ways individuals bring societal influences to bear upon their texts, in ways that are often transparent to us when associated with print media. In

teaching more traditional academic genres, teachers often bring in other works for analysis and discussion. In working with Web genres in the classroom, teachers need to engage students in specific cultural and rhetorical critiques of the Web sites that *they* most frequently visit, in addition to focusing attention on more conventionally academic Web sites, and the societal influences shaping both. We can learn much from studying such sites as UMassDrunks or the personal pages at Yahoo.

When we read, analyze, and compose Web texts with students, we need to also expand our own understandings of genre. As Marcy Bauman has noted, “In this time of unprecedented change, the genres we can invent and the genres we allow ourselves to use as a profession will determine the ways we can act in the world. We owe it to ourselves to draw the parameters as broadly as we can” (1991, 281). By initiating and sustaining disciplinary and classroom conversations centered around explicit analysis and discussion of emerging Web genres, including the diverse genres with which students are most familiar, we will be able to shape most fully how we can act in the world. We owe this to ourselves and, more important, to our students.

NOTES

1. Some students remarked on the sophistication and complexity of Dreamweaver as an editing tool. While using Dreamweaver gave students considerable flexibility in composing their Web pages, it also required sustained and intense instruction over more than one class session. A number of students struggled with the technology and worried out loud that their writing had suffered as a result. These concerns, along with concerns about the availability of Dreamweaver, led me to start reconsidering the ways I taught students to compose Web pages.
2. This is where the effects of parataxis on reading begin to blur with the effects of brevity. In his May 1996 “Alertbox” column, usability expert Jakob Nielsen asserted: “Only 10% of users scroll beyond the information that is visible on the screen when a page comes up.” While Nielsen (1997) has since tempered this advice, suggesting that “the argument against scrolling is no longer as strong as it used to be,” the no-scroll rule seems to have become accepted as conventional wisdom by many who design for the Web, and has led to the phenomenon of sites such as *Salon* and the *New York Times* breaking up their online stories into chunks of roughly 750 words. How do we separate out the sequential “and/and/and” of these chunks from the “and/and/and” of parataxis?

Part of the confusion over parataxis comes from the perception that the term merely means having multiple pages.

3. Since Ken wrote his essay, the UMassDrunks site has been taken down in response to pressure from the university, only to be put back online in a different form.
4. After teaching the course upon which my discussion is based and after researching and drafting this chapter, I read John Killoran's (2002) essay "Under Constriction: Colonization and Synthetic Institutionalization of Web Space," where he reports on his study of 106 personal home pages. He found, as did I, that Web authors frequently modeled their sites on institutional models and that eleven home page authors used lists or forms to identify themselves. Killoran briefly examines those lists for how they position individuals as "domesticated innocuous subjects and objects of a capitalist and bureaucratic order" (27), but he does not make the link to specific corporate Web models shaping the use of lists as means of representation.
5. The Web sites of the students I focus on here were (and may still be) available on the Web, and all students gave permission to show screen captures of their sites. In these screen captures, I have changed students' names and blurred the photos.
6. Responding to and grading Kathy's site was difficult for me because I resisted reading her site within the rhetorical frame she constructed. Whereas she saw this project as existing solely on the Web for her and her boyfriend and for other couples interested in their relationship, I was very cognizant of the more immediate context of College Writing.
7. Since spring 2002, I have taught College Writing just one other semester, and I returned to having all students convert a current issue essay. I did this in part because I think it's easier for students to attend to issues of Web composition, including learning the technology, when they are revising text, not composing anew (especially for students new to Web composition, as most first-year students at UMass are).
8. Greater bandwidth is often more expensive, making economic factors not only a determinant of access to the Internet, but also a determinant of what a user reads and writes on the Internet.