

Digital Literacies and Composition Studies

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In “Moving Beyond Place in Discussions of Literacy,” Jennifer Trainor extends Bruce Horner’s and Kathryn Flannery’s discussions of the dichotomy between academic or school-based writing and everyday writing. While this dichotomy may have been productive for the field, it also may have created a fetishization of the everyday, leading to unproductive curricular happenings. In this sense, Trainor reiterates, the everyday or non-school composing is reified as more authentic and more representative of literacy in the lived experiences of our students. To combat this dichotomy, Trainor has “designed many a curricular intervention aimed at bringing the seeming energy and authenticity of my students’ non-school writing to the classroom.” As an example, Trainor introduces a classroom-based blog activity in which her students were given “freedom to determine the topic, the genre, the design, and the voice of their blogs.” These interventions, such as the blog activity, seek to focus on the purpose and temporality of literacy practices rather than the place of composing. An activity involving the creation of a blog would seem an ideal way to bridge the academic/non-academic dichotomy. Yet, Trainor offers a sample blog from a student relating to “the importance of courtly, gentlemanly values” that failed to appease both Trainor and the student-writer’s classmates. The blog was criticized for mimicking a men’s magazine and for not addressing gender issues. Ultimately, by resorting to a compare/contrast essay form for two posts, following peer feedback, the writer was better able to harness the “tools of the academy” for successful writing.

In Trainor’s depiction of her approach to and impetus for introducing the blog project, she shares her surprise and disappointment over the blog’s lack of immediate impact on her students’ work. But, the introduction of digital technologies, whether blogs, wikis, or iPads, used in any stage of the composing process, will not in and of itself make an impact. Digital and multimedia composing present a seemingly ideal opportunity to bridge the dichotomy of everyday and academic literacies. Like Horner, Flannery, and Trainor, I also seek a bridge through this divide by focusing on the purpose and time rather than place of composing. But, we cannot assume that technology, and digital composing spaces and tools, bridge that divide on their own. These tools, when used acontextually, will not in themselves bridge any divides and may ultimately lead to disappointment. We cannot expect to add digital technologies to our curricula or our classrooms and see improved, or even different, outcomes.

As many scholars have agreed, networked composing is empowering, exciting, and complicated. Yet, most of the composing tools and spaces that allow for and extend digital literacies require a writer's awareness of the rhetorical situation, or, in Stuart Selber's terms, rely on an awareness of the functional, critical, and rhetorical aspects of literacy. As someone who teaches regularly with and through digital composing environments and tools, including blogs, wikis, and social media, I can attest that tools alone will not bridge our dichotomy. In other words, there is nothing inherent in blogs that makes them more rhetorical than a five-paragraph essay. Tools alone will not shed light on the permeation happening between students' everyday and school literacies. Rather, as teachers and researchers of digital literacies, including school and non-school literacies, we must investigate how place, time, and purpose affect our students and curriculum. Asking students to create blogs, especially blogs with no predetermined context or purpose, leads to voice-less, inactive, and misdirected writing. In addition, this type of prompt fails to offer students a complete understanding of blogs vis-à-vis blogs, as well as blogs vis-à-vis other options. Successful blogs, like other successful media, show an attention to all aspects of the rhetorical situation. Why should we expect students to create successful blogs if we do not ask them to first consider that context? I wonder whether the student blogging on "gentlemanly values" had paid enough attention to rhetorical considerations before posting? Had the openness of the writing situation affected his blog's creation and reception? And, would a blog even be the appropriate format for delivering such information?

This response serves as much as a reflection on Trainor and her approach to using blogs as a reminder to myself. As a regular teacher of a course titled "writing in electronic environments," I, along with other course instructors, am constantly reflecting on our goals in the course and how we utilize technology without making the course tool-driven. Rather than walking students through different technologies, we walk them through various composing situations that ask for, and push at, different digital literacies (for more on this course see Dyehouse, Pennell, and Shamoon). As we regularly remind ourselves, technologies and tools will come and go; cutting edge composing technologies today may be gone tomorrow. Yet, an attention to the rhetorical situation, to the functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies of composing with technology will not only sustain students, but will also bridge the academic/non-academic dichotomy. Just as we hope to avoid the fetishization of the everyday, we might also be wary of our tendency to fetishize the digital as we continue teaching and investigating literacy in all places.

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