

New Media and the Media Analysis Essay

Juxtaposing Technology with Common Writing Assignments

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Introduction

Technology has become the ubiquitous behemoth that hovers at every corner of our lives, infiltrated for good or for bad into nearly every aspect of our culture. As educators (and writing instructors), we often view it as an epidemic—a surging plague that damages the way we have done education in the past, and an annoying impediment that barks new ways of teaching and incorporating culture into learning, but offers no solutions on how to do it. In it lies a spate of possibilities, we realize, but we just can't seem to grasp how to teach with it, or if it is even worth the hassle. Then, we look at our students and realize that their very lives are becoming irrevocably connected to this hellion, and we wonder if it is by technological methods that they will learn best. It is, after all, the way they are communicating in, learning about, and becoming a part of their culture. Because of this very quandary, I propose we break down components of the technologies that so often beset us (the ones our students are often already using and familiar with), and look at their uses in very narrowed and specific assignments. By taking the components of technology with which our students are interacting in their lives and their culture, we can look at our current writing assignments and find new methods that will not only better engage them as technologically savvy learners, but enhance their learning experience and strengthen their abilities to write a media analysis essay.

I recently viewed what I would call a very avant-garde website in terms of its methods of reaching its viewers. Though a very strange site, I couldn't help but wonder about the technologies it uses, and how they could relate to interactive learning, and the teaching of common writing assignments—specifically, a media analysis essay. This website, the homepage of the soft drink Sprite, is unique in that it has no typical links that guide the viewer around the site. There are, simply, splashes of images circumnavigating the screen with a very small text box in the center begging the viewer to type something into it. Background noise consists of a woman's voice speaking, sounds of gulping and sighing, and other random reverberations. As the viewer is eventually permitted “entrance” into the site by means of entering hidden passwords, he is given the opportunity to download ringtones for his cell phone, watch video clips, and listen to music. The site is very unconventional, but is also very interactive and engaging; and, isn't that atypical of what our students are being exposed to on a daily basis. As I analyzed the technological components of this website, I realized that there are some very practical applications of technology that are used to enhance the experience of the viewer.

I pulled from this site three major components that are in some way enhancing the learning experience: video, images, and other visual rhetoric; sound bites and various aural components that enhance and alter the experience; and data clouds, which organize text—words, phrases, paragraphs—into clusters around the screen. These technological components, I believe, can be an asset to our teaching—and specifically to our students’ learning—as we apply them to digital, interactive formats. I propose that if we look to the cultural uses of technologies, we can move from the drab, old hat philosophies of teaching assignments like a media analysis by means of prosaic print-based text books and banal lectures, and get our students involved in their learning by allowing them to truly experience the assignment. This can be done, I believe, by using well-designed digital software and online programs that interactively engage our students.

New Media and the Cultural Shift in Education

For centuries, the primary method of teaching has been largely based on instruction from lecture and instruction from books. Limits in technology have nearly forced teachers and authors alike to devote the majority of their instruction around the ideology of Freire’s “banking method”, a pedagogy where:

The teacher [or author of a text] talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity (*Freire 67*).

In many cases, learning has become a system of absorption and regurgitation, a methodology whereby students are compelled to read, listen, and then recite the pieces of information that stuck. In writing instruction, this ideology has been formulated to ingrain students with the fundamentals of grammar, to instruct them how to form an argument, to guide them in devising thesis statements, and, of course, teach them how to avoid “writing faux pas” like dropped quotes and voice shifts. Then the students are asked to take what they have learned, and prove themselves in a written essay. Of course, this system isn’t completely fallible—teachers and authors *do* have a hierarchical jurisdiction to instruct their students and readers on the basics of writing, because to them (the students and readers) the teacher and authors *are*, after all, the experts. Likewise, students have the responsibility to learn and practice what they have been taught. And, this system has, in fact, worked well for centuries. It is not my intention to negate the effectiveness of the way teaching has been done, and, no doubt, will continue to be done. Rather, I’d like

us to acknowledge that new media technology and its increasing availability is giving us more options as educators to teach by methods that are not only interactive and promote multimodal learning, but that allow our students to learn by methods they are already familiar with because of the recent cultural shifts in technology they are experiencing in their day-to-day lives.

The quandary we find ourselves in is not that this technology is here or even that it is changing so fast, but that the world—and particularly the corporate world—is pushing it so fast with such far-reaching effects and potential that our students are entering college so culturally saturated by it that they are beginning to rely on it to connect to their world. If we fail to catch up, our teaching methods may soon become as archaic as the telegraph has in modern communication. Carmen Luke, member of the New London Group, has said, “And unless educators take a lead in developing appropriate pedagogies for these new electronic media and forms of communications, corporate experts will be the ones to determine how people will learn, what they learn, and what constitutes literacy (71).” As the world finds new technological means to reach larger audiences, we may very well find ourselves caught in an impasse that separates us from the ability to efficiently teach in ways that will be truly beneficial to our students.

I want to emphasize that I do *not* feel that education is headed in the wrong direction; rather I feel we are and have been at the forefront of learning and technology. As cultural shifts in communication have occurred, so have the efforts of educators to prepare students for these shifts. In the mid 1980s, for example, when microcomputers were first made affordably available, elementary schools began shuffling their students into DOS-driven computer labs once a week where the kids could sit in front of a black and green screen and learn to type by using programs such as Mavis Beacon. As typewriters were quickly becoming an anachronistic tool for writing, schools began focusing large portions of their budgets to invest in computers and word-processing software. Perhaps at some small risk, these schools began investing in what they thought would be the new trend in writing both for academics and professionally. Twenty years later, it is obvious to us that they did the right thing. In the 1990s, with the launch of the World Wide Web, educators quickly began creating online encyclopedias, databases and electronic archives, virtual libraries, and other efficiency-enhancing computer-mediated communications. We continue to do so, fully aware that electronic communication is soon becoming the culturally-preferred method.

Again, I don't wish to repudiate the progress of education. I just hope to recognize that as technology continues to advance, so does our ability to teach in multimodal learning environments that will more readily connect to our students. As we are now able to more effectively and affordably incorporate technologies that allow for a juxtaposition of visual and aural experiences with textual components and interactive experience, we can continue to be at the forefront of effective teaching

technologies. As humans, after all, we learn by more methods than simply reading and listening. We learn by experiencing and doing. As the New London Group wrote,

...the human mind is not, like a digital computer, a processor of general rules and decontextualized abstractions. Rather, human knowledge, when it is applicable to practice, is primarily situated in socio-cultural settings and heavily contextualized in specific knowledge domains and practices. Such knowledge is inextricably tied to the ability to recognize and act on patterns of data and experience, a process that is acquitted only through experience, since the requisite patterns are often heavily tied and adjusted to context, and are, very often, subtle and complex enough that no one can fully and usefully describe or explicate them (Cope 31).

Just as Gutenberg's press enhanced the world's ability to read, and the 16th century pencil enhanced the world's ability to write, the modern computer is enhancing the world's ability to learn—through multiple forms of communication, from reading and writing, to viewing, listening, and interacting. The modern computer is allowing the human mind to contextualize and recognize patterns of data and experience. Because technology is allowing our students to experience their world in so many ways outside of the classroom, it is becoming imperative that we break down components of these technologies and incorporate them into the teaching of some of our writing assignments inside of the classroom.

New Media Websites and Interactive Learning

As I mentioned earlier, I recently analyzed the corporate website of the soft drink Sprite. As I took the time to interact with the site, I found myself intrigued at the use of new media advertising to reach a new generation—a cohort of techno-whizzy consumers. Interested in the rhetoric of the site, I examined the techniques the company was using to lure the viewer to interact with the site. I looked specifically at three areas of interest: the visual components, the aural components, and the use of text.

Visually, the site was plastered with images literally flying around the screen. There were images from lemons and limes to sumo wrestlers painted in green and yellow to spinning Sprite cans to eyeballs. Once permitted “entrance” into the site (by typing in a “code” word that sporadically would flash across the screen), the viewer could then participate in various interactive activities. In relation to the visual, though, the viewer could watch humorous Sprite commercials. Aurally, there were sounds of strange technological noises, a woman's voice saying things like “greetings” and “lymon loves you”, and gulps, burps, and sighs. Once permitted “entrance”, the viewer could download ringtones, listen to popular rap music, and, of course, the commercials had sound to go along with the video image. Textually, the splash

page offered the option to type random words into a text box. In an unconventional organizational method, the screen would then float definitions of the words across the page, some overlapping.

This site was unique to many websites in copious ways, but many of the technological components were similar to those I'd seen in other corporate sites. Very visual, aural, and interactive websites are becoming a very commonplace medium on the internet. Many corporate sites are using similar methods to reach audiences that thrive on and are beginning to expect these new technologies. I couldn't help but wonder as I viewed this site—if corporate America is able to use these very interactive components of technology to “teach” their audience about their specific product, can we not as educators find ways to do similar things on our specific assignments? Now as I mention this, please note that I am not suggesting that we turn aspects of education into a marketing scheme in order to lure our students into our “propaganda”, or entice them and manipulate them into thinking homework is something that it is not. No, I am merely suggesting that technology can be used in a way that allows students to interact with an idea, to allow their human minds to contextualize knowledge and “situate [it] in socio-cultural settings”. I'm suggesting that we look at the technologies that are being used culturally, and incorporate them into methods that can give our students a hands-on, interactive approach to experiencing an assignment.

The Visual

We cannot neglect the fact that our students are learning about their world through very visual aids. As Charles Hill argues,

The students now entering our classrooms have grown up with one hundred channels of television, and the World Wide Web is no longer a novelty, but part of their social, academic, and working lives. If we include nonelectronic sources of visual communication such as billboards, print advertisements, and the ubiquitous packaging that has taken such an important place in our consumer culture, then we have to conclude that most of the information that our students are exposed to is in a visual form (Hill 107).

Our students are being bombarded by a very consumer-driven society that spends billions to force images into their minds. These students have almost innately begun to learn how to sift through which commercials, billboards, television programs, movies, print ads, and magazine covers they wish to pay any attention to at all. Most of what the world is offering them is some kind of image or group of images that are combined to send a rhetorical message. Particularly in regards to a writing assignment where the student is asked to analyze something (like a media artifact), it almost seems absurd to teach them how to do the assignment without using some kind of visual aid. The blessing of technology is that it allows us to

use many visuals simultaneously, and in many different ways. And, with the ability to watch film, students can learn even more techniques about argument, style, and voice by watching various components of a specific clip.

Technology is a means whereby we can facilitate and enhance the teaching of rhetoric, a principle entering college students ought to learn in order to better analyze audience and argument. With a digital text that allows students to interact with an image or video clip, they can learn firsthand how components of a visual message can significantly alter the meaning. If for example, a black and white Calvin Klein ad shows a man in white boxers in a sexually provocative pose, and there is a bottle of cologne resting on the table next to him, the ad is taken very serious as an expression of what men can expect if they were to buy this product. If, however, the student could take that same picture, and see the man in color, wearing pink boxers and a clown afro wig, the image would obviously take on a new meaning. Students could take a collection of visuals and analyze how when components change, the rhetoric changes, and thus, the author/audience position changes. Using technology as a means to show a variety images to students can be a very effective tool to teach argument and rhetoric.

The Aural

Auditory instructional techniques unfortunately seem to be neglected tools in enhancing our students' learning. With the advancement in recording technologies, and the ability to save and download music as simple files, sound has become a much more real and everyday part of our students' lives. It can and should be becoming a much more real aspect of our students' education. When we look into multimodality as a system for learning, we focus on what the New London Group has coined as 'Designs'—where “teachers...are seen as designers of learning processes and environments, not as bosses dictating what those in their charge should think or do (Cope 19).” The designs we use as teachers create meaning for our students, and will be much more effective if we use multiple resources for meaning-making, including not just seeing and reading, but *listening* as well (19 – 22). The aural aspect of learning ought to be incorporated just as often as the visual and textual if we are going to design well-rounded meaning-making environments. The New London Group goes on to say:

Teachers and students need a language to describe the forms of meaning.... In other words, they need a metalanguage—a language for talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions. ...[As educators we need to develop] a metalanguage that describes meaning in various realms. These include the textual and the visual, as well as the multimodal relations between the different meaning-making processes [such as the aural] that are now so critical in media texts and the texts of electronic multimedia (Cope 23 – 24).

In other words, learning is about creating meaning, and that meaning-making is a very multimodal process that is experienced by the human body in multiple realms. The *audio design* is a very important part of that multimodal learning process, as is any other existential part of the human learning experience. And that audio design includes things such as music, sound effects, and other forms of auditory experience (25 – 26).

Giving our students the ability to further learn the concepts of argument, rhetoric, and audience through the use of sound, or ‘sonic literacy’ as Comstock and Hocks call it, can become a very integral part of our students’ learning. Allowing them to listen to and manipulate sounds can give them a hands-on approach to understanding how the ways sounds are produced can directly influence the way the listener (audience) reacts. Integrating sonic literacy into our classrooms is yet another way we can “[extend] and [amplify] our [students’] bodily faculties” (Comstock). Technology is allowing us to move one step further in the meaning-making process for our students, because it is now, more than ever, making it very easy to bring sonic literacy into the classroom.

The Textual

Of course, we are all familiar with the many uses of text in learning environments, first and foremost in written texts such as books, journals, newspapers, and other palpable forms of common media. We are also familiar with the way text is being used in many new aesthetically attractive modes such as in word processing programs, on the internet, and in television and other digital media. But technology is now making it possible to organize and highlight repetitive text by using technological applications such as data clouds or data tags. Imagine the possibilities of teaching students ways in which to organize papers, and improve word choice and banal redundancies by simply having the ability to see what words they are using where, and how often.

Again, rhetoric is once again reinforced by the use of digitally organizing the text our students’ write as they are able to locate components and phrases in their papers that we may refer to as god and devil terms. Student’s can begin to better understand how the words they are using are being associated to other phrases and terms in their readers’ minds. Written text has, of course, been a foundation to education even from the time it was being criticized by academic elitists such as Plato (Baron 18). Nearly since its inception, written text has been the means of strengthening and ameliorating the way humanity views education and communication. But it hasn’t been until recently that technology has created the ability to look at large amounts of clustered text to help the writer see exactly what he is doing with the words and phrases in his essay.

Technology and the Media Analysis Essay

The Media Analysis Essay is a very basic writing assignment we use in our introduction to academic writing courses at Utah State University. It is an analytical essay designed to get our students thinking critically about rhetoric and argument, audience, persuasion, voice, and tone. Instructors generally have a unit on media where they will spend time having in-class discussions about various forms of media, and specific artifacts within media genres. Students learn to analyze the artifact and its components, discussing how the author/creator of the artifact intended to reach his audience and whether or not he is effective and why. Teachers will bring in numerous artifacts such as songs, TV commercials, print ads, movies and television shows, websites, and so forth, helping the students to have somewhat visual and aural experiences with several artifacts.

Obviously, this isn't necessarily ineffective—in fact, it is the only method whereby we've been able to use technology in our classrooms for such an assignment. And, while I think this method is functional, I think we now have the ability to take the instruction a step further. If we were to give our students a digital text that they could personally interact with, they would be able to further experience the artifacts, study rhetoric and persuasion, and learn by doing. What if, for example, students could look at a set of images, like two pictures of George W. Bush, manipulated in two different ways? One image would have an American flag in the background, with the president smiling patriotically. In the other picture, President Bush would be wearing a turban and sporting a long white beard. Obviously the two images would send clearly different messages. (Note that it would probably be a good idea in the actual text to use a much more politically benign image—I mention this example solely because it is a clear instance of rhetoric and persuasion.) The digital text could give an explanation of rhetorical choices, ask the student a number of questions, and then let the student try. The student would have the ability to manipulate the images and send different messages to an audience. The students could learn by doing. Or, for example a montage of images could be set to a song. The student could then play different songs to the montage, or change the images for the same son. Again, the student could make his own rhetorical choices, and learn directly how changing components of and artifact can completely change an argument.

The digital text could then be used to spawn writing exercises, allowing the students the chance to strengthen their writing skills. Along with this, tag clouds could be used to show the students what vocabulary there are using, how they are using it, and some possible options for changing it. The student could, for example, write a brief analytical essay about the rhetorical strategies he used when manipulation the images of a montage put to a song. Then, he could “dump” his text into an engine that would sort the words he most commonly used, how he used them, and in relation to what terms. He could get a sense for “god and devil” terms, and learn how his words also reflect his rhetorical choices. Technology could be used to enhance a very practical, hands-on approach to the studying and learning of

media, analysis, rhetoric, argument, persuasion, tone ,voice, and specific writing skills that reflect each on of these.

Conclusion

Because our students are interacting more and more with the technologies that their culture is flooding them with, they will soon be expecting similar engaging methods to enhance their educational experience. As educators, it is becoming imperative that we look to methods whereby we can use these same technologies, and incorporate them into our writing instruction. Because our bodies are designed to learn by contextualizing knowledge in very multimodal environments, we should find more ways to offer multimodal instruction in the classroom. We can look at the technologies that are being used, and put them into a text that can teach very specific assignments, like the media analysis essay. If we do this, one assignment at a time, we can find ways to incorporate such teaching methods into the pedagogies that are already working for us.

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