

Abstract for Dissertation

By

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Escaping Flatland: Weaving Words and Images in Visual Communication

“The domains of word and image are like two countries that speak different languages, but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange, and other forms of intercourse.”

Mitchell, 1996, p.49

Theory guides pedagogy and while much composition theory is grounded in various concepts of literacy, the transaction between writer and reader, the classroom environment and the pedagogies shape the communication as well. For the purposes of this paper, I envision visual communication, both linear and nonlinear composing using images and words, to be a larger view of composition in which literacy is only one of many elements shaping the composing process in a computer-assisted writing environment.

Visual communication, an integration and sharing of meaning-making in transactions between writer/creator and reader/viewer via signs, symbols, images or words, is the actual process students engage in when constructing and interpreting linear and nonlinear compositions in the electronic classroom. As such, visual communication incorporates cultural, social and political influences in that transaction. For, as Anne Wysocki (1999) reminds us, when we ask students to write using technology, we enlarge what we mean by composition; simultaneously, we increase the importance of support for students and faculty, all of whom bring a wide range of needs to computer-assisted writing.

This dissertation traces the learning process my students and I engaged in, spring semester 2000, in English 383 Science Writing. English 383 had 15 students during the Spring semester, providing ample space for me, the interns or the students to move about for collaborative work or comfort. The chairs are on wheels; I teach using a student-centered, decentralized style; and students are free to move about, as they need to. It is an informal, professional atmosphere. The syllabus is posted and assignments are completed online, but we meet face-to-face also. All online course documents may be downloaded remotely, or at no cost in the lab. Collaboration and student-led discussions are frequent. It is what Dewey (1916) would call a democratic workspace.

This particular class was distinctive because of the level of active engagement, the maturity of the writing community that formed, the students' desire to investigate and take risks in a new writing process and reader/writing relationship, and the degree of increased visual awareness in making meaning and displaying information for a reader. Looking back, every student in the class participated. They loved or hated the readings, especially the suggestion that fiction could be science writing, yet they all contributed to intelligent discussions, asked good questions, turned in all assignments, and listened to their classmates. As a requirement, students answered the online journal prompts and then responded via the classlist to one of their classmate's journals, weekly; though only one response was required, elaborate, extended conversation threads developed. Equally interesting were the think aloud exercises I observed in which student partners both transcribed and coauthored text. And throughout the course, I witnessed student writers recognizing style, format and content boundaries appropriate in different media and forms, for different readers. At the end of the course, the student writers thought first of the idea being transacted with the reader, and second of whether word or image or type of display worked more effectively—they developed an awareness of design concepts, realizing word and image are

communicative tools for the idea. As well, they claimed greater clarity regarding the differences between a linear and nonlinear writing process. And, perhaps most notably, the class members became very good critical thinkers who learned to weigh the validity of print and online source material and think of writing as a shared transaction, between writer and reader.

My two focus informants, Esther and Lisa, present the truest narrative for the class's progress, though many students were excellent candidates and will contribute to the discussion. I selected these informants based on my initial needs analysis of the students and their "beginning stories". Because I assume the skills, expertise, access, learning styles, and experience the students bring significantly affect their success in a computer-assisted writing classroom, I selected one student who entered as a strong writer with considerable visual/verbal technology skills and one who entered as weaker. Both are women; both are geography majors; both are Caucasian; both are in their early twenties. As well, they present as good candidates for contrast in the following areas: attitude toward learning, level of comfort with technology, adaptability to the decentralized classroom environment, and visual awareness.

During the semester, both Esther and Lisa improved their writing skills and their concept of science writing, though at very different rates and in very different ways. What makes their stories so compelling are the individual episodes in which they recognized and honed their own changing writing process and their increased awareness of text as a visual medium. These episodes, and the description of the environment in which they occurred, provide significant information for other educators. While this particular course and the experiences of these two women are not immediately transferable, similar settings and pedagogies may be adaptable. Other students and their teachers, struggling with a new learning space, teaching style, content, and writing process, may find useful, Esther and Lisa's experiences in escaping flatland. For, "whether the technology is word processing, electronic mail, hypertext or the internet, these technologies alter how language, both written and visual, is produced, processed and used... The application of the technologies influences the generation, manipulation, storage, retrieval, and revision of texts as well as the products at the end... in spaces that are different from those that have preceded them." (Snyder, 1998, xx)

We need to study students in the computer-assisted writing environment because the communication process we teach, evaluate and use has changed completely. Yet, even our most progressive curricula promote computer-assisted writing instruction as a new *literacy*-- in the naming potentially limiting the way we write and think about computer-assisted composition because literacy has been, by definition, print-based. So, while literacy, including technological and visual literacy, is certainly part of what our students strive to acquire in our writing classes, it is only a piece of the visual communication process. With visual communication, seemingly made more immediate in the computer-assisted classroom, nonlinear and visual forms of communication are less bound by the rules of print, design becomes integral to composing, and writing and technology are 'intertwined'. Our computer-assisted writing programs require a new approach, a less narrowly held definition of literacy, and a clearer understanding of composition. Our task as educators becomes "finding practical ways in which we can help students and adults alike to live on the surface without succumbing to cultural fragmentation". (Synder, xxxix)

This study argues that computer-assisted writing is most accurately conceptualized as visual communication which:

1. involves a newly formed *transaction* between the reader and writer;
2. develops in a supportive, reflective, decentralized *environment*; and
3. incorporates *pedagogies* focused on visual and verbal composing.