

Composing Digital Writing Relationships: Toward an Infrastructural Approach to Digital Design and Pedagogy

Digital educators and composers are often tasked with a variety of mentoring roles, from introducing new software and conceptual frameworks to helping colleagues, clients, and community partners rethink the way they communicate with various audiences and via various kinds of new media. Sometimes it becomes important for us to coach someone closely as they take their initial forays into digital composing, and sometimes it's important for us to get out of the way and let them explore a new medium or technology on their own. Many of us build relationships around digital writing as we hold workshops, invite hesitant colleagues or clients into our classrooms and workspaces, or attempt to build bridges with industry partners. In other words, I would like to argue, many of us are engaged in the work of infrastructure-building: we help assemble networks of people and resources that are sustained for sometimes years at a time, and that make digital composing within and between different kinds of organizations possible.

If we attempt to build infrastructures that push against clearly defined organizational prerogatives we take on even more roles. We may write internal or external grants to net funding to support new initiatives. We may create partnerships around service-learning curricula or community events. If we are a digital composer with a strong foothold within a certain industry, our livelihood may even depend on our ability to build and sustain new relationships around digital writing. It is these kinds of moves that I would like to talk to you about today. Speaking from my respective roles as a digital composer and facilitator and as a newly minted assistant professor of digital and professional writing, I hope to accomplish several things with this presentation:

1) I want to spell out some of the rhetorical moves that I've found useful in these roles and how these moves translate from my work as a digital writer to my work as an educator and facilitator

2) I want to tell you some (hopefully) useful stories about relationships I've built around particular kinds of digital media, and about what these relationships have taught me regarding who I am as a digital writer

3) Finally, in the spirit of this year's conference theme, I'd like to tell you about how my efforts at relationship-building and effective digital composition have caused me to transition across the gateways and barriers of organizations I've been affiliated with, and into new writing territories, territories in which I've found interesting opportunities for the application of digital composing

Towards a professional and civic rhetoric for digital composing

Another important context for my argument is that as academic programs release students into a job marketplace increasingly dependent on high-end digital

technologies, and a variety of communities continue to suffer from inadequate access to and facility with these same technologies, it is our obligation as digital educators and facilitators to help students, colleagues, and community members to help bridge the so-called knowledge gap between academic and industry contexts. As the authors of *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts* claim, from their research into classrooms and workplaces in Canada, workplace writing situations are often 'worlds apart' from their academic counterparts, or so contextually dissimilar that there is a rift between student preparation in the academy and participation and performance in the workplace. Marshalling the results of seven years of research at multiple sites, the authors argue that while writing, as taught in the university, is epistemic and evaluative, writing as deployed in the workplace is solely performative, or, to put it another way, "[w]riting at work as an economic activity justifies the kind of intervention and assistance needed to ensure a flawless performance. Writing at school, because of the focus on learning, allows teachers to discount errors or failures to meet specific demands or expectations, in favor of assessing what has been learned" (68).

In their conclusion, these writers suggest useful heuristics for bridging the gap as much as possible between university and workplace contexts and for making student transitions between the two easier. These include continuing to value, or even more explicitly foregrounding the value, of writing as an epistemic activity, an emphasis that, since they did not find it present in the workplaces they studied, they think is more valuable because it is only to be found in the classroom, and thus represents students' only opportunity to encounter writing in this way (232). In addition, they suggest that "constituting [a given] class as a working group with some degree of complexity, continuity, and interdependency of joint activity" might approximate the complicated activities that occur in workplaces (235).

One possible barrier to bringing extracurricular genres such as those found in workplace or other community-based situations into academic contexts, however, is that, to quote Anthony Michel, David Sheridan, and Jim Ridolfo, "both the civic and the multimodal continue to be integrated into our classrooms in reductive, limiting ways...That is, we have students write *about* the civic sphere, not *in* it" (805; emphasis in original). In place of current conceptions of public writing and rhetoric, these authors offer an "admittedly utopian vision" of the public sphere in which it "becomes a space where non-specialists self-reflexively engage in a 'conversation' characterized by the rhetorically effective integration of words, images, sounds and other semiotic elements" (805). Further, because "The kind of multimodal public sphere [they] imagine is contingent upon non-specialist citizens having access to an array of cultural and material resources, including technologies, knowledge bases, and skill sets," their rhetoric "requires a critical praxis of interdisciplinarity" (807; 812).

Furthermore, creating such a praxis-based intervention within both industry-specific and academic contexts, will not only require the ability to reach across disciplinary boundaries, but the willingness of writing professionals to try out composing within writing territories that may be unfamiliar and even alienating to us, territories where our own expertise as writing professionals may be called into question. Imagine spaces in which community members from a variety of

backgrounds and levels of digital expertise gather with writing professionals and students to foster digital compositions that actually make an impact for the stakeholders involved. Imagine spaces in which the traditional hierarchies of student/teacher, producer/consumer, and company/customer are blurred by the necessity of collaborating on projects that have outcomes for everyone involved. My experiences have taken me into and out of such spaces, and have involved attempts to build such spaces. As I will claim below, such spaces necessitate a lot of complex rhetorical moves, moves that I turn to now, as well as some stories that will hopefully ground these moves in the material spaces and situations I have used them in.

The (rhetorical) moves are the message

My rhetoric of digital composing, similar to Ellen Cushman's "Praxis of New Media" invites stakeholders into a "a flexibly structured inquiry and problem solving approach" (114). And like Cushman, Jeff Grabill, Heidi McKee, and many others, I believe that the ability to critically utilize new media technologies in a variety of spaces to shape information for and with a variety of audiences is an essential skill not only for 21st century learners, but for 21st century citizens and workers. After all, as Cushman points out, both digital classes and service-learning classes have something in common, which is that while service-learning classes "have tended to work in interstitial places in general, often bridging academic units, disciplines, and university and community divides," digital classes have had to "justify themselves in order to gain university resources and flex institutional structures" (122). In addition, I think that Jeff Grabill means something similar to Cushman's idea of the connections between service-learning and digital technologies when he quips that "[i]n a knowledge society, the work of citizenship is knowledge work." For Grabill, "[w]hen citizens fail to be persuasive, their shortcomings might not be due to skill, knowledge, imagination, philosophy, or organization...The failure may be as simple, and as complex, as a failure to conceptualize and conduct work effectively." Thus, like him, I wish to "understand the work of citizenship and imagine the support necessary for this work."

Part of the work necessary for effective citizenship, be it in a professional setting, as a college student, or as a community organizer or activist, I'd like to claim, is this ability that Cushman mentions to "flex institutional structures," which is the first rhetorical move I'd like to highlight. Flexing institutional structures is an important metaphor for me, because it contains a simultaneous reference to the resistance, elasticity, and possibility contained within structures such as computer labs, offices, computer networks, digital video cameras, software, web domains, databases, web-based applications, and the groups of people that perform work with and within these structures. Learning how to flex such structures effectively, then, involves understanding infrastructures, in the words of Star and Ruhleder, not as "substrate[s]," or material bases upon which an organization runs, but as "fundamentally relational" (112). Just as a tool only has real meaning when put into usage, rather than defining an infrastructure as a built structure which has "pre-given attributes frozen in time," I'm defining infrastructure as "something that

emerges for people in practice, connected to activities and structures” (112). Infrastructures, which can be understood as the sum total of supportive resources and practices within a given writing situation, are the parts of organizations which can be flexed, in other words, parts which can be repurposed, altered, added to, and restructured. Infrastructures exist within the kairotic openings that occur among people and the material resources they assemble in order to write.

Let me give an example to contextualize this first rhetorical move, “flexing institutional structures.” One way in which I have attempted to flex institutional structures is by helping communities to garner technological resources such as computers, professional-grade digital video cameras and all their attendant gear, software, skill sets, habits of mind, and value systems. I have done this in various capacities, as a new media facilitator, teacher, and researcher. During my time working with the Capital Area Community Media Center, for instance, I have helped conduct workshops, have consulted with community organizations to help them purchase relevant technology and to help them integrate that technology into their organizational infrastructures, have produced digital media collaboratively with these organizations, and have even wrote and supported community grants to help organizations net new equipment. This involved flexing such institutional structures as the Lansing city government, the Lansing Public Media Center, and curriculum and technological resources available through Michigan State University’s graduate programs in Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures.

The phrase “flexing institutional structures,” you see, has multiple meanings for me. It means moving structures that are institutionalized, or that have ossified into certain set configurations. It took 5 years of combined effort amongst dozens of stakeholders to get decision-makers in the Lansing city government to make community grants available for interested organizations, for instance. In this case, the tax money from cable subscribers was being held in limbo by a city government struggling to deal with an economic downturn. There was significant resistance to the idea of repurposing this funding for the production of community media, an unknown quantity to interested gatekeepers. As a Ph.D. student and new media composer, then, the umbrella of the Capital Area Community Media Center encouraged me to move into several new writing territories beyond what I had previously experienced, such as web design within the non-profit sector, digital documentaries that were primarily for community audiences, and service-learning classes and partnerships built around digital media.

Another important meaning behind “flexing institutional structures” involves my second rhetorical move, then, which I call “changing standards.” As Danielle Devoss, Jeff Grabill, and Ellen Cushman claim in their landmark article on writing infrastructures, “[w]hen the tasks of composing—including the tasks of thinking, of imagining, of creating—are not consistent with existing standards, practices, and values, infrastructure breaks down, revealing the need to meet the demands of new meaning-making practices” (34-5). Thus a focus on the kairotic elements of composing infrastructures requires writers to “reach beyond the frameworks that we typically rely upon to understand composing processes and spaces of composing” (36). Institutional structures can only be flexed, in other words, when they are most pliable, when opportunities arise to shift them into new

configurations, and when enough of a critical mass of people and resources gets behind this shift. This often happens when the infrastructure sustaining them breaks down, when there are not enough resources to maintain 'business-as-usual,' and/or when people become dissatisfied enough with business-as-usual to apply the necessary pressure for change to occur.

To contextualize the move "changing standards," I'd now like to shift to another story, which involves my move into a tenure-track position as an assistant professor of new media, rhetoric, and professional writing within an English department. While these has been an entirely new territory for me, my previous experience flexing institutional structures had prepared me well for this work. I am of the ilk, you see, that when joining a new organization as someone who is versed not only in digital composing but in all the infrastructure necessary for this composing to function, it is my responsibility to have an impact on the standards by which composing is judged.

In the past seven months of my new job, this has mostly taken the path of instituting new curricula within the English department of SUNY Cortland, curricula that challenge the current status quo of what "professional writing" is at that institution. Towards this end, I'd like to briefly highlight two new classes, one I have developed and one I am developing, and to talk about how their development has impacted writing standards at SUNY Cortland. I have been fortunate to join a department that, though mostly invested in teaching literature, is, for the most part, open to new media composing as a valid topic of study. Additionally, a professional writing major has been in existence within the department for some time, a major which includes a sophomore level-course called "Writing in the Digital Age," and an upper-division counterpart of this same course (though the upper division course has never been taught). Unfortunately, as often happens, before my hire there was a two-year hiatus in which neither course was taught, and students were allowed to take other courses to make up for this required portion of the major.

During this time professional writing became standardized within other required courses largely as essayistic and traditional creative genres, such as rhetorical analysis papers, poems, stories, memoirs, and performance pieces, based on the backgrounds and predilection of the existing teachers of the PW courses. Though there was an odd blogging assignment here and there, for the most part students weren't introduced to new media composing as a kind of professional writing that could be impactful both within their writing lives and in their local communities. Within this context, I decided to introduce a version of "Writing in the Digital Age" which not only introduces students to digital genres such as social media, electronic portfolios, and organizational websites, and all their attendant content, markup languages, and methods of delivery, but, as of this semester, partners students with local organizations who want to improve their digital presence.

This change in standards has not been easy. Of course being hired as a tenure-track assistant professor is a truly kairotic opportunity to shift writing standards through curriculum development, but what I mentioned earlier about flexing institutional structures holds true at this level as well: they must be flexible enough to allow standards to shift, and people who maintain the infrastructures

supporting those standards must be at least open to, if not openly supportive of, this change as well. Interestingly, my most difficult population to get traction among for this shift has been professional writing majors themselves, most of whom have been intensely distrustful of the digital writing genres I've introduced them to. Though it took me most of my first semester to wrap my brain around this resistance, one particularly resistant student summed up the standard I was encountering rather well, I think:

"I don't like how digital media has impacted our culture...it's led to narcissism and a lack of communication skills and just a drastic shift in priorities and what's right and wrong and necessary and unnecessary and I know it's not just technology or digital media that's changed our culture but they've definitely played a part."

The standards many of the majors themselves hold puts traditional genres above digital ones in their hierarchy of which writing genres are the most valuable. And most of these students have let me know that this belief system is not likely to shift any time soon.

Standards within infrastructures are never black and white, however, so at the same time that I have dealt with a majority of students over the past seven months whose writerly identities are solidly, and it would seem, inevitably, tied to older media of expression, there have been several students who have taken the new standards I've introduced and run with them. One communications major, for instance, created this professional website for herself, the first draft of which was produced in my class: <http://kelseyfoote.com>, and is using it as a platform through which to net web design internships. Another student, a political science major, created this website for the SUNY Cortland Golf Club for his final project: <http://studentweb.cortland.edu/erik.burrows/clubgolf/homepage.html>, and currently plans to launch a part-time career designing websites for friends, family, and acquaintances.

For my third and final rhetorical move, which I call "making new media old media," I'd like to hazard an educated guess at the roots of the resistance to digital composing I'm encountering amongst the professional writing majors at SUNY Cortland, because I think it speaks to the moment a lot of organizations within our culture are at when it comes to digital composing. In the context of comparing the history of recorded sound with that of the World Wide Web, Lisa Gitelman argues in her book *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* that media "become self-evident as the result of social processes, including the habits associated with other, related media," meaning that through their usage, the way media represent the world to audiences becomes increasingly self-evident, just as scientific instruments gain consensus as devices necessary for the detection of certain phenomena (6). Thus the "introduction of new media...is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such. Comparing and contrasting new media thus stand to offer a view of negotiability in itself—a view, that is, of the contested relations of force that determine the pathways by which new media may eventually become old hat" (6).

Throughout the territories I've traversed as a digital composer, my goal has not been to make new media *new* to the communities and cultures I've been part of, but to make them "old hat." I want people to make use of new media in their daily lives, to feel familiar and comfortable with them, to incorporate them into their lives in whatever way they see fit, but I want them to do so because they, themselves, consider them useful. As an assistant professor joining a community of undergraduate writers who mostly see new media as not fitting into their daily lives, I have had to make tough choices with how much I push them to integrate these media into their emerging identities as professional writers. I've decided that, as an advocate of digital composing and someone with a decent understanding of the current job market for professional writers, it would be highly unethical not to teach incoming majors skill sets that can help them net sustainable jobs. In addition, the current version of the class, in which students are actually partnered with community organizations who want digital media composed for them, has heralded a lot less resistance from professional writing majors enrolled in the class. Perhaps this is because, rather than just a digital culture filled with "narcissism and lack of communication skills," students are seeing organizations who are trying to provide valuable services to the Cortland community, and who need to reach out to these audiences through effective digital media. Perhaps the answer to helping stakeholders make actual use of digital media, then, is to ensure that they are in a position to actually contribute to an already existing local infrastructure, to invite them to do work with someone whose end product is not actually digital media at all, but the relationships they're hoping to build with it.

Works Cited:

- Cushman, Ellen. "Toward A Praxis of New Media: The Allotment Period In Cherokee History." *Reflections On Community-Based Writing Instruction*. 4.3 (2006): 124-43.
- DeVoss, Danielle, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey T. Grabill "Infrastructure and Composing: The When of New Media Writing." *CCC*. 57.1 (2005): pgs. 14-44.
- Dias, Patrick, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999.
- Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.
- Grabill, Jeffrey T. *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007.
- Michel, Anthony J., Jim Ridolfo and David M. Sheridan. "The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric." *JAC: a Journal of Composition Theory*. 25.4 (2005): pgs. 803-844.
- Star, Susan Leigh and Karen Ruhleder. "Steps Toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces." *Information Systems Research* 7 (1996): pgs. 111-34.