Janet Eldred

Review Essay

To Code or Not to Code, or, If I Can't Program a Computer, Why Am I Teaching Writing?

Electronic Collaboration in the Humanities
Ed. James A. Inman, Cheryl Reed, and Peter Sands
Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.

Multiliteracies for a Digital Age
Stuart A. Selber
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. Studies in Writing &
Rhetoric (SWR) Series.

**Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of
Composition**
Anne Frances Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, Geoffrey Sirc
Logan, Utah: Utah State University, 2004.

The pace of the academy is notoriously slow, a trait both maligned and cel-
ebrated, which poses an interesting problem for academic publications about
computing. There is always a concern: by the time the information passes
through all the necessary channels and is lasered into print, will it still be rel-
evant? It remains reassuring to see that even rapidly-changing technologies
can gain from the kind of measured academic reflection offered by these three
very different works—a teacher's sourcebook, a single-authored book, and an

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edited collection. So what exactly can we learn by examining these three books together? We can learn that within the subfield of computers and writing, perhaps even within the field of composition and rhetoric more generally, a change is once again unfolding. The disciplinary terrain is shifting; technical writing suddenly seems less relegated to that second, optional, disciplinary service course and more vital to the work of first-year composition. The signs of disciplinary transformation are visible in a rising attraction to design and a concomitant attention to social concerns and public service.

Of course, just how different first-year writing instruction will look a decade or two out hinges on several factors, not the least of which is institutional capacity for change. "Institutional capacity for change"—isn't this an oxymoron? Perhaps, but let me assume that institutional change is swift and uniform, which will allow me to pose this question: When the focus of first-year classrooms, nationwide and across institutions of varying types, shifts away from alphabetic print literacy, what will take its place in the academic spotlight? These books taken together stand as a pretty good indicator, but like the scarecrow in the *Wizard of Oz*, they point in two different directions simultaneously. Down one path, we see "teachers of digital communication," a vision that entails some code making (programming). Down the other, we see "teachers of visual rhetoric," a vision, which, while it certainly can embrace a variety of new technologies, can also be accomplished with the old tools of scissors, glue, drawing pencils, and paper. Both directions require that professors profess less and learn more, although those in the visual rhetoric camp claim "rhetoric" and "poetics" as our areas of expertise and neatly (perhaps too neatly) extend this expertise to principles of design.

Let me begin with *Electronic Collaboration in the Humanities*. Like any good edited collection, this brings together a range of scholarship, designed, in this case, to appeal both to those new to digital pedagogy and to those practiced in it. The descriptors in its title are apt: the collection focuses broadly on the humanities, rather than on writing studies, and on a very plastic definition of "collaboration." The essays in the collection span the concerns of the last two decades—for example, questions of CMC's (or MOO's) democratic and distance-learning possibilities, as well as questions of postmodern identity. Most interesting to me were the extensions into two related areas: the local implications (positive, negative, mixed) of technologies with global reach, and service learning experiments. The projects described in the essays vary greatly: Radhika Gajjala and Annapurna Mamidipudi explored how they might form

"discursive and action-based networks," driven by the specific project of "trying to revive the old technology of vegetable dying and cotton handloom weaving in a few villages of South India" (66). Their collaborative article, which draws from and critiques postcolonial theory, examines issues of complicity and resistance. Jo B. Paoletti, Mary Corbin Sies, and Virginia Jenkins write about a digital service learning project that resulted in the creation of a virtual museum, a pedagogical website, and numerous student projects that were filed in the actual museum and referenced by docents. The project was impressively successful and serves as a model for other scholars interested in digital service learning, the more so because the authors are careful to delineate the potential problems: If students create a website for a community group, who owns it? In such collaborative ventures, who has final say about the content? If students with sophisticated coding skills create the website, who in the community maintains it, after students have moved on? Will busy employees have the knowledge—or the aptitude or the time—to learn, say, HTML at a similarly complex level? How are funding issues resolved? How, in short, is the project sustained? While complicated by partnerships that extend beyond the university, these issues are present even when virtual archives are located within the academy, as Caroline Szylowicz and Jo Kibbee describe in their work with the Kolb-Proust Archive, which is virtually housed in the University of Illinois library. Add to this situation, as T. Lloyd Benson points out in his response article, commercial vendors and granting agencies, and the waters muddy further.

Stuart Selber's book *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* invites us to "reimagine" computer literacy using three different conceptual frameworks—functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy—each of which he fully explicates in the book's three middle chapters. While the book is primarily theoretical, it aims to move individual instructors, but more emphatically programs, to build curricula that address all three literacies. Selber's book is remarkable not just because it is interdisciplinary, but because it synthesizes parallel academic conversations, the insider nattering, if you will, about liberal arts education, composition studies, computers and composition, literacy studies, human computer interaction, and social activism. Very useful to any of us involved in reformulations or revisions of general (liberal arts) education is his critique of "computer literacy requirements" in Chapter 1. In this chapter, Selber warns against the oversimplified functional approach to computer literacy (have all students mastered a word processor? a spread sheet?).

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At all times in the book, Selber's academic cards are on the table: he is a proponent of broad-based liberal education and perhaps more emphatically, of teaching as social activism. His purpose in applying concepts from critical literacy to computing is to "provide a metadiscourse that can focus student attention in a decidedly politicized fashion." To this end, Selber articulates the politics of the critical literacy he embraces, focusing on questions of who gains and loses as technology "progresses": "Who profits? Who is left behind and for what reasons? What is privileged in terms of literacy and learning and cultural capital? What political and cultural values and assumptions are embedded in hardware and software?" Selber has partial answers to these questions which inform his premise, namely, "that computers often exacerbate the very inequities that technology is so frequently supposed to ameliorate" (80). That having been said, some of his practical, pedagogical changes, the focus of the last chapter, are quite modest in scope. For example, he suggests not that the resumé assignment in a technical writing class be dumped in favor, say, of a humanities-based unit on corporations and social activism (and, perhaps on a critique of global corporations' adopting of activist campaigns so we can feel good while we sip our coffee or eat our ice cream), but instead that the resumes be made digital, and then remade more persuasively digital.

But I am quibbling. Throughout, Selber's larger plan is clear. He argues that students need to be producers (not just users) of digital text and that these texts will largely be of a kind that "defy the established purview of English departments" and move instead "into the territory of writing and communication teachers" (139). While he doesn't expect that students will be designing word processing software—he leaves that to the computer scientists—he does expect that students in composition courses will author "realistic examples include[ing] informational Websites, hypertextual bibliographies, and online documents that serve instrumental purposes." Such texts presume content, to be sure, yet "such texts have interfaces, often intricate ones, that must be designed by their authors, our students" (143). Citing critics who argue that we are products of "an outdated educational system that fails to prepare individuals for the realities of postindustrial work," he concedes that most faculty, particularly those matriculating from English departments, simply won't have the necessary expertise (157). The solution? Teachers must position themselves as "true learners," discovering "ways to comfortably introduce precarious topics and effectively communicate to students that it is not only acceptable but desirable, at least on some level, for their teachers to become real colearners" (202). While Selber adequately covers the ideal of dialogic learn-

ing, he doesn't address the administrative conundrum: how do we convince university administrators to hire an (unqualified) Ph.D. to learn on the university's time? Why not hire, say, cheaper labor? In other words, why pay a professor's salary when there's no expertise to profess? Digital technologies certainly haven't created the labor problems in composition, but given such arguments, they very well may exacerbate them. One suspects (or at least this reviewer does) that the case Selber really wants to make is that twenty-first-century writing instructors won't be well served by the kind of print-based Ph.D. programs largely available in English departments. There *is* an expertise needed (some level of programming), but few Ph.D.s are graduating as experts.

In fact, the question of expertise continues to haunt the composition and rhetoric literature, a situation that *Writing New Media*, a collaborative project by four teacher-scholars, sets out to remedy. It positions itself as a text that helps people in writing studies gain new practical, pedagogical expertise. Anne Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc begin each of their respective sections with a theoretical grounding, followed by assignments and teaching notes and evaluation sheets that they urge their readers to adapt and use. In this sense, the work is a perfect sourcebook for a teaching seminar, say that "Introduction to Teaching Composition" course required of most English graduate students. But in tone—and in design (it highlights the principles of visual design that it imparts)—it addresses the anxieties of the alphabetic print scholar facing the twenty-first century. Worried about how to do this new media stuff, particularly now that it is no longer simply email and word processing but *multimedia*? Feel unready for the postindustrial classroom? Join the club, these well-recognized scholars in computers and composition say. Geoffrey Sirc even begins his section with a confession: "Let me confess: it has been a frustrating last several years for me in my writing courses. The rapid advance of technology has meant a pedagogical dilemma for me: just what do I do in the classroom, what do I teach?" (111). Teachers need new models and new practices as well as new theories; they need to become doers as well as thinkers. This book is designed to make teachers "active, reflective, responsible composers"—and "confident, effective, and ethical" ones at that (vii). Its method is rhetorical: the authors meet their audience in a recognizable disciplinary home, professing expertise and building on knowledge of research methods, of creative forms like poetry, of rhetorical principles, all of which, they argue, can be extended to new media.

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The authors in *Writing New Media* focus not only on the analysis but also the *production* of new media texts. This agenda they share with Selber. However, in this book, the authors emphasize rhetorical and creative principles and argue that production of new media need not entail learning code, need not be restricted to composing in digital media. Wysocki articulates this principle in boldface: "**we should call 'new media' those texts that have been made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts and who then highlight the materiality. . . .** Under this definition, **new media texts do not have to be digital**; instead, any text that has been designed so that its materiality is not effaced can count as new media" (15). Conversely, she argues, "Under this definition, neither is it 'new media' simply to have a text that incorporates text and sound and graphics and animation and photographs or illustrations in some combinatorial ratio other than that of a traditional academic or literary text. . . I am trying to get a definition that encourages us to stay alert to *how* and *why* we make these combinations of materials, not simply *that* we do it" (19).[1] For the instructor who has students (or who is himself or herself) daunted by a lack of programming skills, Cynthia Selfe recommends "a multiple media redesign of a paper they have written using images passed on poster board, audio tapes, photographs, and/or video elements" (64).

Those discovering and exploring and promoting the necessity and possibilities of what is sometimes referred to as the fifth C—computing—have contributed greatly to the field through a combination of traits best summarized by Bill Friedheim's response in *Electronic Collaboration in the Humanities:* "Risk taking, vision, persistence, and stubborn willpower are familiar qualities that characterize pioneers in technology and teaching. But there are only so many pioneers. How do we encourage the vast majority of our colleagues to take the leap?" He recommends an infrastructure that "trains faculty . . .in the use of hardware and software" and in "interactive and inquiry based" practices. Of course, such an infrastructure as he argues requires truly "smart" classrooms, support, and rewards. It would also require, as Selber articulates, a fairly complete overhaul of English as a discipline. *Writing New Media* instead suggests taking an approach that has worked well for composition as a discipline (though not as a professional workplace): Assign expertise to the field of rhetoric and composition as a whole and change practice through handbooks and sourcebooks and textbooks. Instructors can accrue expertise as they teach. It

is a kind of practical optimism, or perhaps "stubborn willpower." When life won't give us lemons—or computerized classrooms with support and rewards—we use paper and scissors and glue and transform the things we have in abundance and know and love best: poetry and rhetoric. Those with high levels of expertise will code, others will not, but all will do the work of imagining alternatives to alphabetic print forms, and this might, just might, get us to Oz. At the very least, it gets us to stop talking and start down a path.

Note

1. While I have underscored the differences here with Selber's views, it is worth noting that he too is critical of the perfunctory digital assignment, the one that requires students to include "particular site elements: for example, five paragraphs of text, one ordered list, two unordered lists, three graphics, one image map or animated image, three internal links with anchors, three external links, and two manipulations of text attributes. It is the electronic equivalent of the five-paragraph essay assignment" (136).

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