

CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments

Conference on College Composition and Communication, February 2004

[In the spring of 2003, then-Chair of CCCC Shirley Wilson Logan appointed a CCCC Committee whose purpose was to create a position statement governing the teaching, learning, and assessing of writing in digital environments. This is the document this group produced; it was adopted by the CCCC Executive Committee as of February 25, 2004.]

Submitted by the CCCC Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments (Kathleen Yancey, Chair; Andrea Lunsford; James McDonald; Charles Moran; Michael Neal; Chet Pryor; Duane Roen; Cindy Selfe)

Increasingly, classes and programs in writing require that students compose digitally. Such writing occurs both in conventional “face-to-face” classrooms and in classes and programs that are delivered at a distance. The expression “composing digitally” can refer to a myriad of practices. In its simplest form, such writing can refer to a “mixed media” writing practice, the kind that occurs when students compose at a computer screen, using a word processor, so that they can submit the writing in print (Moran). Such writing may not utilize the formatting conventions such as italics and bold facing available on a word processor; alternatively, such writing often includes sophisticated formatting as well as hypertextual links. Digital composing can take many other forms as well. For example, such composing can mean participating in an online discussion through a listserv or bulletin board (Huot and Takayoshi). It can refer to creating compositions in presentation software. It can refer to participating in chat rooms or creating webpages. It can mean creating a digital portfolio with audio and video files as well as scanned print writings. Most recently, it can mean composing on a class weblog or wiki. And more generally, as composers use digital technology to create new genres, we can expect the variety of digital compositions to continue proliferating.

The focus of writing instruction is expanding: the curriculum of composition is widening to include not one but two literacies: a literacy of print and a literacy of the screen. In addition, work in one medium is used to enhance learning in the other.

As we refine current practices and invent new ones for digital literacy, we need to assure that principles of good practice governing these new activities are clearly articulated.

Assumptions

Courses that engage students in writing digitally may have many features, but all of them should

1. introduce students to the epistemic (knowledge-constructing) characteristics of information technology, some of which are generic to information technology and some of which are specific to the fields in which the information technology is used;
2. provide students with opportunities to apply digital technologies to solve substantial problems common to the academic, professional, civic, and/or personal realm of their lives;
3. include much hands-on use of technologies;
4. engage students in the critical evaluation of information (see American Library Association, “Information Literacy”); and
5. prepare students to be reflective practitioners.

As with all teaching and learning, the foundation for teaching writing digitally must be university, college, department, program, and course learning goals or outcomes. These outcomes should reflect current knowledge in the field (such as those articulated in the “WPA Outcomes Statement”), as well as the needs of students, who will be expected to write for a variety of purposes in the academic, professional, civic, and personal arenas of life. Once programs and faculty have established learning outcomes, they then can make thoughtful decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Writing instruction is delivered contextually. Therefore, institutional mission statements should also inform decisions about teaching writing digitally in the same ways that they should inform any curricular and pedagogical decisions.

Regardless of the medium in which writers choose to work, all writing is social; accordingly, response to and evaluation of writing are human activities, and in the classroom, their primary purpose is to enhance learning.

Therefore, faculty will

1. incorporate principles of best practices in teaching and learning. As Chickering and Ehrmann explain, those principles are equally applicable to face-to-face, hybrid, and online instruction
 - Good Practice Encourages Contacts Between Student and Faculty
 - Good Practice Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation Among Students
 - Good Practice Uses Active Learning Techniques
 - Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback
 - Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task
 - Good Practice Communicates High Expectations
 - Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning
2. provide for the needs of students who are place-bound and time-bound.
3. be guided by the principles outlined in the CCCC “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement” for assessment of student work in all learning environments—in face-to-face, in hybrid, and in online situations. Given new genres, assessment may require new criteria: the attributes of a hypertextual essay are likely to vary from those of a print essay; the attributes of a weblog differ from those of a print journal (Yancey). Because digital environments make sharing work especially convenient, we would expect to find considerable human interaction around texts; through such interaction, students learn that humans write to other humans for specific purposes. Good assessment requires human readers.

Administrators with responsibilities for writing programs will

1. assure that all matriculated students have sufficient access to the requisite technology, thus bridging the “digital divide” in the local context. Students who face special economic and cultural hurdles (see Digital Divide Network) as well as those with disabilities will receive the support necessary for them to succeed;
2. assure that students off campus, particularly in distance learning situations, have access to the same library resources available to other students (see American Library Association, “Guidelines for Distance Learning”);
3. assure that reward structures for faculty teaching digital writing value such work appropriately. Department, college, and institutional policies and procedures for annual reviews and for promotion and tenure should acknowledge the time and intellectual energy required to teach writing digitally (see CCCC “Promotion and Tenure” and “Tenure and Promotion Cases for Composition Faculty Who Work with Technology”). This work is located within a new field of expertise and should be both supported—with hardware and software—and recognized. Similarly, institutions that expect faculty to write for publication must have policies that value scholarly work focused on writing in digital environments—the scholarship of discovery, application/engagement, integration, and teaching (see Boyer; Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff; Shulman);
4. assure that faculty have ready access to diverse forms of technical and pedagogical professional development before and while they teach in digital environments. Such support should include regular and just-in-time workshops, courses, individual consultations, and Web resources;
5. provide adequate infrastructure for teaching writing in digital environments, including routine access to current hardware; and
6. develop equitable policies for ownership of intellectual property that take effect before online classes commence

Writing Programs, in concert with their institutions, will

1. assess students’ readiness to succeed in learning to write in digital environments. Programs should assess students’ access to hardware, software and access tools used in the course, as well as students’ previous experience with those tools. In order to enhance learning, programs may also assess students’ attitudes about learning in online environments; and
2. facilitate the development of electronic portfolios where such programs are in place or are under consideration. As important, writing programs will work to help develop the infrastructure and the pedagogy to assist students in moving their portfolios from one course to another, one program to another, one institution to another, as well as from educational institutions to the workplace, working to keep learning at the center of the enterprise and to assure that students learn to use the technology, not just consume it. To accomplish this goal, institutions need to work with professional organizations and software manufacturers to develop portfolio models that serve learning.

A Current Challenge: Electronic Rating

Because all writing is social, all writing should be human readers, regardless of the writing. Assessment of writing that is scored by human readers can take time; machine-reading of placement writing gives quick, almost-instantaneous scoring and thus helps provide the kind of quick assessment that helps facilitate college orientation and registration procedures as well as exit assessments.

The speed of machine-scoring is offset by a number of disadvantages. Writing-to-a-machine violates the essentially social nature of writing: we write to others for social purposes. If a student's first writing-experience at an institution is writing to a machine, for instance, this sends a message: writing at this institution is not valued as human communication—and this in turn reduces the validity of the assessment. Further, since we can not know the criteria by which the computer scores the writing, we can not know whether particular kinds of bias may have been built into the scoring. And finally, if high schools see themselves as preparing students for college writing, and if college writing becomes to any degree machine-scored, high schools will begin to prepare their students to write for machines.

We understand that machine-scoring programs are under consideration not just for the scoring of placement tests, but for responding to student writing in writing centers and as exit tests. We oppose the use of machine-scored writing in the assessment of writing.

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