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ScienceDirect

Computers and Composition 31 (2014) 1–12

Computers and Composition

www.elsevier.com/locate/compcom

Staging Encounters: Assessing the Performance of Context in Students' Multimodal Writing

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Received 28 October 2013; accepted 19 December 2013

Abstract

Acknowledging the nearly universal recognition of the significance of *context* to writing and writing assessment as well as the bedeviling nature of this vague term, this article sketches a theory of context that is at once appropriate to multimodal meaning-making and practicable for multimodal writing assessment. This theory, which insists that texts and contexts are mutually constitutive, reveals the ways in which multimodal texts perform contexts of production and reception. Using a student example, the article models how to assess the performance of context in students' multimodal writing.

Keywords: writing assessment; multimodal

Almost all of us in writing studies seem to agree—*context matters*. Indeed, we might say that "context" functions as a kind of god-term in the field in general and in writing assessment in particular. Perhaps this claim seems a bit extreme—as Kenneth Burke (1969) explains, god-terms are vague but powerful words or phrases around which people organize their lives. One might think of "freedom" or "money," perhaps—a term load-bearing enough "that we can treat the world in terms of it, seeing all as emanations, near and far, of its light" (Burke, 1969, p. 105). But when we compositionists talk shop, this is not too far off from the way we discuss "context." Our most robust scholarly conversations—about writing assessment, WAC/WID, multilingual/translingual writing, and transfer of learning, for instance—turn on the importance of context, variously described as rhetorical situations, discourse communities, scenes, locations, spaces, activity systems, geographies, environments, or ecologies. We agree that classroom contexts must be facilitative of writing activity. That students must have meaningful contexts for their writing. That writing must be understood within the context in which it is practiced. That any attempt to interpret or assess writing "out of context" is tantamount to an act of violence. Our professional motto might as well be "You had to be there."

Compositionists may not have a motto, but we do have posters. The very first *CCC* poster page (Fig. 1)—a feature intended to introduce key terms to general audiences—elucidated "rhetorical situation," complete with an image of the rhetorical triangle (subject, composer, audience) surrounded by a circle representing "context." I will return to this image in a moment; my point here is that it demonstrates the centrality of "context" to the field. (Also consider: a CompPile keyword quick search for "context" returns almost 1700 hits; compare this to 154 hits for "multimodal.")

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8755-4615/$ – see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2013.12.001

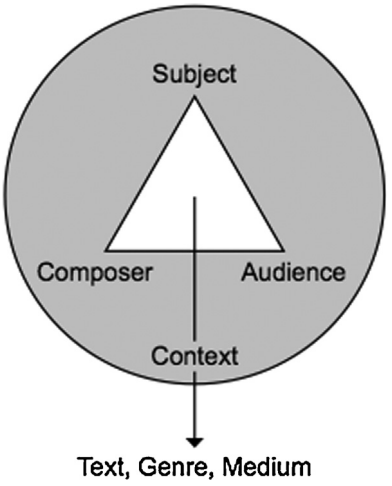

Figure 1. Rhetorical Situation (NCTE, 2010).

In writing assessment in particular, "context" might be said to function as a kind of shibboleth among compositionists, a mark of our fierce resistance to decontextualized, standardized writing assessment promoted by the testing industry, many policymakers, and some psychometricians. *Context matters* is one of the few principles on which our writing assessment scholars, deeply divided on other matters, agree. For instance, Brian Huot's (2002) influential principles for writing assessment—site based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically based, and accessible (p. 105)—made abundantly clear his commitment to context. While Patricia Lynne (2004) forcefully critiqued Huot on several fronts—most pointedly for what she views as his complicity in advancing a psychometric worldview—she also grounded her thinking in a "contextual paradigm," in which "literacy is profoundly situated: literate acts occur only in specific circumstances, and without an understanding of the historical, theoretical, and political context, literacy has limited value" (p. 56–7). It appears there is no theoretical fault line in our writing assessment scholarship that "context" cannot span.

The problem with god-terms, Burke suggested, is that they "explain too little by explaining too much" (p. 107). The image on the *CCC* poster is emblematic: while the "context" circle envelops the rhetorical triangle, there is no indication of what is included in, and excluded from, its circumference. Aside from the triangle itself (in which we find "text, genre, medium"), the space inside the circle is blank. The written explanation included on the poster is no help: the word "context" does not appear even once. Context is invoked, but not specified.

Perhaps specification is too much to ask of a humble poster, but this move is representative of the field at large. For all our commitment to the term, we do not seem to have achieved much clarity about what a context *is*. On a basic level, what we talk about when we talk about context is *what surrounds texts*—what is outside and beyond them. For example, The National Writing Project's promising Multimodal Assessment Project (MAP), which identifies "context" as one of the five recurring elements of multimodal composing, defined context as "the world around the artifact, around the creation of the artifact, and how the artifact enters and fits into the world" (National Writing Project, para. 2). But this understanding of the term raises more questions than it answers.

First, it is not clear precisely what "the world" around the artifact and its creation includes—or *would not* include. We might agree, for instance, that a writer's physical context matters, but does it matter in which chair she sits? Whether her back hurts or her head aches? The slant of light through the blinds? The clamor of children playing or dogs barking? Whether she used a coaster for the coffee (or whiskey) she has placed on the coffee table? This can get very silly very quickly, but we know, as writers, that the most quotidian details often *do* matter. And we have not yet begun to account for other kinds of contexts—historical, psychological, technological, economic, cultural, or political—that are surely relevant here. This bewildering complexity of multiple, overlapping contexts is particularly confounding in writing assessment situations, where the kinds of information we would need to account for them are in short supply and where, even if we had this information, we would not have the time or labor power to sort through it.

The second, related problem with the notion of context as the world surrounding an artifact and its creation is its assumption that the boundaries between texts and worlds are clearly marked and easily discerned.[1] For the purposes of assessment, it is convenient to think of a text as a "consumable product that can stand-alone [sic]" (National Writing Project, para. 3) and "the world" as existing prior to and outside that text; after all, we need to specify an object of assessment. But, it is not always easy to tell where a text—particularly a multimodal text—ends and where its context begins; as I discuss below, multimodal texts are always and only partially bounded and temporarily stabilized. Assessment that ignores these characteristics of multimodal texts misses some of their key features.

In short, by trying to explain too much, our commonsense notion of context as the surround of texts ends up explaining too little. In this article, I seek to reverse Burke's formulation by suggesting that we can explain more by explaining less. Specifically, I propose that multimodal writing assessment can more productively engage "context" by shifting our focus from the surround to how multimodal texts *perform* contexts.

The notion that texts perform contexts is meant to underscore the mutually constitutive relationship between texts and contexts while keeping our analytical focus on the work of texts in shaping and maintaining this relationship. As I will show, multimodal texts perform contexts through their *interfaces*, which I define as encounters between users (composers and readers/viewers[2]) of texts and the spaces in which those encounters occur. This performance is, of course, rhetorical, and it strongly influences the effectiveness of multimodal texts. The key assessment questions here, then, are *How (effectively) does the text perform contexts? How (well) does its interface stage encounters with users?*[3] Questions like these cannot be answered in a vacuum—the surround always matters—but they focus our attention on what the text does, including how it performs its surround. In practical terms, attending to interfaces allows us to focus our assessment time and energy—always in limited supply—on texts without treating those texts as fully bounded and stable objects.

Ultimately, this essay aims to offer a theory of context that allows multimodal writing assessment to account for context.[4] In order to arrive at this theory, I turn to two concepts that figure the relationship between texts and contexts differently: ecology and interface. I then use the latter to examine a student example, demonstrating *how* multimodal writing assessment can account for performances of context in multimodal texts.

Texts, contexts, and ecologies of writing

Although Marilyn Cooper (1986) insisted that for her, "the term *ecological* is not.. simply the newest way to say 'contextual,'" the exigency she identified for her important article "The Ecology of Writing" was the problem she saw with how prior contextual models, such as Burke's pentad, "perceive the context in which a piece of writing is done" (p. 367). Those models treat context as "unique, unconnected with other situations" (p. 367). By contrast, the "central tenet" of Cooper's ecological model of writing was that "writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (p. 367). Cooper's project was to describe more accurately how writers and writing engage with the world around them. Her principal contribution is to shift our attention from the individual writer in her immediate context to the rich and dynamic interactions among natural and social systems in which writers are embedded. While prior theories of context posit a static, bounded, generalized entity, Cooper showed

[1] I am choosing to think of artifacts as "texts," a term the MAP group also uses. I recognize the risk here, given that term's association with both alphabetic forms and bounded objects. But, its Latin roots in the concept of "weaving" reminds us that any text is intimately connected to (indeed, is made of) other texts (see Yancey, 2004). I am drawn to the image of a multimodal composer as a weaver, interlacing threads through wefts and warps, making, remaking, and unmaking texts as she spins.

[2] Multimodal and digital writing confound terminology around audience, and I have no good answer to the question of what to call individuals who interact with and participate in multimodal texts but who are not their initial composers. "Receivers" identifies their temporally secondary position but underestimates their active role in multimodal text construction and meaning making. "Consumers" is worse on that score. "Prosumers," while perhaps closest in spirit, seems silly.

[3] These slightly awkward formulations recognize that assessment can be both descriptive and evaluative. In the writing program I direct, we are crafting reading protocols that allow us both to describe and to evaluate student writing. We are heavily influenced in this work by Carl Whithaus's (2005) theory of interactive, situated, descriptive, distributive assessment.

[4] While my focus in this article is on how multimodal texts construct contexts of reception and production, it is of course the case that readers and programs construct, and must account for, particular contexts of reception—of assessment—as well. Drawing on Moss et al.'s generative IDA (interpretations, decisions, actions) model, Davis and Yancey, this volume, offer a rich discussion of these contexts—beginning, appropriately, with reading and interpretation.

that ecological theory offers something more complex: dynamic, interlocking systems. Memorably, she suggested that "the metaphor for writing suggested by the ecological model is that of a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole" (p. 370).

Cooper's notion of ecology has been enormously influential in writing studies. Her work has been taken up and extended by many scholars (e.g., Brooke, 2009; Dobrin, 2011; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002; Rivers & Weber, 2011; Syverson, 1999; Weisser & Dobrin, 2001). This work has further complicated our understanding of context, reorienting writing theory and research away from simply describing local contexts (classrooms, workplaces, etc.) and toward analyzing complex systems in which writing and writers are enmeshed.

Margaret A. Syverson (1999) offered one of the most compelling extensions of Cooper's concept of ecology. For Syverson, ecology was "a kind of meta-complex system composed of interrelated and interdependent complex systems and their environmental structures and processes" (p. 5). These systems range from families to global economies to languages. Writers, readers, and texts participate simultaneously in all of these complex systems, and they themselves comprise "a complex system of self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic interactions" (p. 5). According to Syverson, complex systems are *distributed*: divided and shared "among agents and structures in the environment"; *embodied*: grounded in "physical experience and interactions"; *emergent*: self-organizing through the interaction of agents and structures; and *enacted*: brought into being though situated practice over time. (p. xv–xvi) Syverson posited that these attributes may be studied across five "mutually specify[ing]" dimensions of complex systems: the physical, the social, the psychological, the temporal, and the spatial (p. 18).

Syverson moves us a fair distance from simplistic notions of contexts as static, bounded places where individual writers generate self-contained texts. Along with Cooper, she helped pave the way for compelling composition theory drawing on complexity and chaos theories (e.g., Dobrin, 2011; Hawk, 2007; Sanchez, 2005). At the same time, the notion of writing "ecologies" poses theoretical and practical difficulties. One theoretical difficulty, which I do not have space to elaborate here, involves the way in which the interdisciplinary "ecological turn" treats social and cultural practices such as languages and writing as natural, biological phenomena, thereby (at best) eliding or (at worst) apologizing for the force of human practices such as racism and colonialism (see Pennycook, 2004; Trimbur, 2009).[5] More germane to our concerns here, "ecology" may function as a substitute god-term. As Cooper's web metaphor and Syverson's description of ecology as a "meta-complex system" suggest, ecology is meant to be all-encompassing, to explain everything. While this irreducible complexity is exciting when studying texts or composing processes, it confounds writing assessment, as the institutional conditions under which is it normally performed do not allow us to account for Syverson's "meta-complex systems composed of interrelated and interdependent complex systems and their environmental structures and processes" (1999, p. 5).

Also of concern for assessment, the metaphor of "ecology" tends to draw attention away from texts.[6] Consider, for instance, Syverson's case study of a passage from a poem by Charles Reznikoff. Syverson wanted to "look closely at the passage to discover how it is embedded in an ecology of composition" (p. 31). "In looking at a text," she wrote,

> we might consider what agents are involved in constructing the text; what physical, material, or technological structures in the environment are integral to its production; what kinds of processes and interactions are involved; and how the text is distributed. In other words, how is the generation of the text distributed across our five dimensions: the physical, the psychological, the social, the spatial, and the temporal? (p. 37)

[5] Dobrin's (2011) *Postcomposition* provides a revealing example of the thickets into which the ecology metaphor can lead. For Dobrin, the problem with "ecocomposition," a subfield he helped found, is that it does not go far enough in capturing the intricacies of writing. He claimed that what "ecocomposition postcomposition" needs are not better metaphors, but rather a "move away from the will to metaphor as a primary mode of theorizing writing" (p.134). But, he continued to discuss writing largely within a biological framework that views systems as "spontaneously self-organizing" and "evolutionary" (p.170–71). He attempted to move beyond traditional evolutionary biology by calling on fluid dynamics and fluid mechanics to describe writing as a "complex 'liquid' system" (p. 179). But as he noted, this model is no less indebted to "scientific systems theories" (p. 181) and is no less metaphorical. Despite his purported turn away from "the will to metaphor," his allegiance to ecology caused him to offer sentences like this: "Writing fills; writing overflows. Like a river that carves its path over time while engulfing all within its path, flowing over, in, around, and through that which it encounters, reacting to every presence, even retreating and abandoning at times, writing overwhelms the network, saturating every part of the network" (p. 183–4).

[6] I am not arguing here for a formalist return to the text as a bounded, fixed object. Nor am I arguing for what Jody Shipka (2011), after Deborah Brandt, describes as a "text-dependent conception of literacy" that fails "to examine final products *in relation to* the complex and highly distributed processes involved in the production, distribution, and valuation of those products" (p. 51). As I hope will become clear, I am arguing that such an examination cannot forget texts and indeed has much to learn *from* texts about those processes.

But Syverson does not much "look at the text." She spends most of the chapter engaged in extra-textual research that uncovers how Reznikoff and his parents collaboratively produced the text. Syverson demonstrated that "what appears to be a simple memory of an individual experience grows more complex and depends upon the embodied experience of Reznikoff's parents as well" (p. 51). But this interesting insight about distributed, embodied experience cannot be arrived at by looking at the text, no matter how closely. The passage did not offer up a history of its own construction or enact a textual world as rich as Syverson reconstructed for it through this research.

Of course, the reader is part of Syverson's "ecology," and so this kind of reconstruction of textual contexts is not a problem *per se*. But, the text is more or less left behind, reduced to a site of hints and traces of the surround that produced it.[7] And this is in a case study of a *text*; in Syverson's next case study, focused on writers, the text is entirely absent: we get pages and pages of classroom context—the course, the assignment, the schedule, peer workshops, conferences with the instructor, and the textbook—but only a general statement that the text the group produced was "a failure."

Syverson suggested that "[p]robably the greatest challenge for research raised by an ecological approach to composing is that the subjects of inquiry are not primarily objects or objectified subjects but relationships and dynamic processes" (p. 186). This challenge is compounded for writing *assessment*, which rarely affords the luxury of time or labor to study, as Svverson does, the complex systems in which the texts before us—and texts are typically the primary artifacts we have available to us—are embedded.[8] But, part of the difficulty here, in my view, is that the ecological approach has tended to devalue and under-conceptualize texts as "objects or objectified subjects." In particular, this approach does not adequately recognize the constitutive role of texts in the "relationships and dynamic processes" it wishes to study.

Texts, contexts, and interfaces

By contrast, Collin Gifford Brooke's (2009) concept of "interface" views texts not only as participating in, but also *performing* "relationships and dynamic processes." Far from treating texts as bounded, static "products," decoupled from their contexts, Brooke posited texts as "special, stabilized instances of an ongoing process conducted at the level of the interface" (p. 25). Interfaces, for Brooke, are "imperfectly bounded encounters where users, technologies, and contexts intersect" (p. 200).

Though Brooke's definition suggests that interfaces *are* encounters, his use of the word "where" suggests they are also spaces or zones in which such encounters occur. [9] What is interesting and important about those zones for our purposes is that they are constructed—or, better, *performed*. They are human artifacts, built and rebuilt by composers and readers/viewers through the ongoing processes of communication. Unlike traditional conceptions of the interface as the spatial arrangement of visual elements on a computer screen, Brooke views the interface as a dynamic, relational process, and therefore only ever partially bounded and temporarily stabilized.[10] Interfaces, then, are performances of contexts that stage encounters between and among composers and readers/viewers.

The performance/staging metaphor is useful for multimodal writing in particular in its invocation of an art form that typically includes words, images, video, movement, and sound. Just as multimodal texts make meaning through the productive interaction of what Claire Lauer (2009) called "the "mixed logics" of more than one mode (p. 227; see

[7] Syverson may have in mind something like Michael McGee's (n.d.) argument that a text can be understood as a "fragment" of its context that provides "a map of the structures that make it complete," if only we follow its "implications" (para. 22). To my mind, the notion of fragment does not adequately capture the relationship between texts and contexts. Invoking "piece" or "part," it rests on separation. Indeed, with its Latin roots in *fragmentum*, it implies a break, rather than continuity. In any case, Syverson's analysis did not hew nearly as closely to the text as McGee advised.

[8] Interestingly, Syverson ended her book with a discussion of assessment, in particular the Learning Record (LR) as an assessment model. The LR has much to recommend it. It collects both student work and various responses to it, allowing students to self-evaluate and to track their progress over time. It offers a rich interface for conversation about student work. But, that interface is provided *for* students, rather than created by them. As is true of Syverson's ecological model in general, it places emphasis on the worlds around texts without attending to the worlds created in and by those texts.

[9] More recently, Nathaniel I. Córdova (2013) has similarly theorized interface as a zone, a "virtual site" where people interact with each other, technologies, texts, tools, etc. Córdova offers interface as one of five "relations" that characterize multimodal texts in public discourse, the other four being fragmentation, articulation, circulation, and convergence (p. 151ff.).

[10] Brooke's notion of interfaces as rhetorical, relational, and politically interested is consistent with the views of many others who have published in the pages of this journal; see Anne Frances Wysocki & Julia I. Jasken, 2004; Joel Haefner, 2009; Teena AM. Carnegie, 2009; Rick Carpenter, 2009; Kevin Eric DePew & Heather Lettner-Rust, 2009.

also Cordova, 2013), so too do they perform contexts. In other words, multimodal texts stage encounters between and among composers and readers/viewers through the meaningful juxtaposition and combination of multiple modes.

Jody Shipka's (2005; 2011; 2013) work helps elucidate this point. In "A Multimodal Task-based Framework," Shipka (2005) does not use the term "interface," but she is interested in multimodal composing as a means of providing students opportunities for "structuring the occasions for, as well as the reception and delivery of, the work they produce" (p. 279). One of the affordances of multimodal composing, according to Shipka, is that it offers students tools for shaping the contexts in which readers/viewers will encounter their work. She provided several examples of projects—ranging from a final "portfolio" submitted as a series of gift boxes to be distributed by the receiver to a "test" that subjects must self-administer using a set of mirrors and print texts—in which students use a range of materials to "engineer" rhetorical contexts for the reception of their work. The point here is not simply that multimodal texts "tell" readers/viewers how to read and understand them (though sometimes they do); it is that their materialities allow them to construct an interface—to perform a context—that stages encounters between and among composers and readers/viewers.

Shipka (2005) contended that multimodal composing allows students to "attend to the various ways in which communicative texts and events shape, and take shape from, the contexts and media in which they are *produced* and received" (p. 299; emphasis added). To capture the contexts on the production side, Shipka asked students to produce accompanying texts such as "heads-up statements" that explain their rhetorical choices. She did not discuss the possibility that multimodal texts themselves could recreate the contexts of their production.

Kathleen Yancey (2004) considered this possibility, specifically with reference to electronic portfolios. Drawing on Michael Davidson's notion of the "palimtext," which "retains vestiges of prior writings out of which it emerges. . . the still-visible record of its response to those earlier writing" (p. 741), Yancey suggested that eportfolios provide affordances for displaying multiple, layered, sometimes overlapping contexts: the "digital portfolio makes multiple contexts a part of the display, which in the case of portfolios means linking internally to the students' own work, linking externally to multiple worlds outside the students' own purview to show multiple and complex relationships" (p. 750). Another way to conceptualize this "display" is to think of it as an interface—a performance of contexts of reception *and* production.

In the next section, I discuss how an eportfolio composed in the writing program I direct performs contexts of reception and production through its multimodal interface. My goal is not to hold up this example as particularly strong or especially weak; rather, I use it to show *how* multimodal texts perform contexts and *that* we can assess such performances.

Assessing performances of context

At the time she composed her first electronic portfolio, "Putting Education Under the Microscope," Brenda Marte (2012) was a first-semester, first-year student enrolled in both the General Studies Program (GSP), a one-year academic support program that helps students transition to the university, and the Torch Scholars Program, which provides scholarships and academic support for first-generation, low-income students who have overcome exceptional odds.[11] She produced this eportfolio for her Introductory Writing course, the first of a two-course stretch sequence for students in the GSP. Her assignment operated from a "task-based multimodal framework" (Shipka, 2005); drawing on her own experiences, course readings, and her own research, she was to create a digital project that offered an audience of her choice a sustained engagement with the idea of education. She was also to include process documentation, so her teacher and peers could see *how* she constructed the project.

Brenda's eportfolio has 12 pages and 16 subpages. It includes 20 images, several of which are compound (collages) and two of which are animated. Most of these images are not self-created but have been selected from online sites such as Flickr and Photobucket. They include photographs of authors Brenda discusses, a photo of herself, images that reflect content either metaphorically (the ubiquitous image of a reflection in water for her reflective essay) or directly (a chart visually depicting an education theory she's discussing), and word art. She uses different font colors and sizes throughout for emphasis and ornament. She also provides links to 11 videos, including nine movie clips, which she curated and provided introductory captions for using Windows MovieMaker. In short, "Putting Education Under the

[11] This example used with permission of the student author, who has published her eportfolio to the web.

Microscope" is robustly multimodal, offering readers a rich array of alphabetic text, images, sound, and video. As we will see, Brenda employed these modes in combination—with varying levels of success—to create an interface that performs contexts of reception and production.

Context of reception

The most obvious way that Brenda performed a context of reception is by designing her eportfolio to resemble a digital book. It has pages that function as a cover, a preface, an introduction, and an afterword, and the preface likens the tabs to a table of contents. Certainly, the interface could be more clearly designed to invoke a book—the word "Preface" could appear in the tab, rather than only on the page, and "chapters" could be identified as such—but there can be no doubt that Brenda attempted to remediate the book in this digital environment. Her introduction—"What is Education?"—established the central question of the inquiry and offers the notion of education as a "way of life," a theme that will carry through the "chapters." These chapters were by turn deeply personal, offering reflections on Brenda's struggles with education (her family's poverty, being ridiculed by peers for being "the teacher's pet," her growing alienation from her family as she became the first to graduate from high school and go on to college, her experience of a serious car crash), and sociological, examining social factors affecting education, such as gangs, drugs, and violence. Throughout, she drew on and put into conversation her own experiences, depictions of education in popular culture (particularly films), the work of educational theorists, and readings from her class, including Freire's "The Banking Model of Education" and Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire."

Brenda worked to stage an encounter with readers/viewers through the design of her eportfolio. Surely she chose to remediate a print book because she associated education, and specifically educators (a primary audience), with books. Also, at various moments in the eportfolio, Brenda directly addressed her readers/viewers. Toward the end of the preface, for instance, she wrote, "as you continue venturing off into this endless abyss of education E-Portfolio, ask yourself this[:] 'What were/are your education complications?' and then try to answer why that was." This "Dear Reader" moment was a direct attempt to shape readers'/viewers' experience of the text—to perform a context of reception.

Or, rather, context*s* of reception, for Brenda were clearly aware that different readers/viewers will experience the text in different ways, depending on their experiences, perspectives, and purposes. For instance, Brenda carefully cordoned off her process material into two pages—"CONSTRUCTION SITE" and "Reflective Essay"—suggesting that she is aware that only some of her readers will be interested in learning how she put together her project; others can easily ignore these materials and just read the "book." She created an interface that allowed for multiple *kinds* of encounters.

Brenda worked multimodally to perform contexts of reception for her work. For instance, her homepage/cover included the title of the eportfolio and the tabs/table of contents, but it was dominated by a large visual collage depicting various depictions of education and schooling. The collage consisted of photographs and images whose juxtaposition generates tension: a warm, colorful crayon drawing sat next to a photograph of a neglected, graffiti-covered brick building, presumably a school; a bright yellow smiley face sat next to a dark, gray image of an urban tenement; etc. At the center of the image was a word cloud dominated by the phrase "Critical Thinking" and a signpost whose signs read "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" and "How?" Through this combination of word and image, the homepage/cover posed difficult questions about the nature and function of education and implicitly invites readers/viewers into shared critical inquiry.

Figs. 2–4.

Brenda used still images and videos throughout the eportfolio. Though her page designs were not particularly sophisticated, and sometimes perhaps at times too busy, her use of relatively short written text, images, and a range of colors demonstrated her understanding that remediation of the book requires writing for the screen, not the page.

But Brenda's "visual approach," as she calls it, was not premised on accommodating hyperattention or on ornament, but rather on staging encounters of shared meaning-making. For instance, she explained that she was attempting to portray the complexity of education—its challenges and its benefits—"through a series of examples that can interact the viewer with images of historical and more outdated photographs of the education system as well as more modern ones." While not exactly idiomatic, her phrase "interact the viewer" suggests that she imagined an intimate relationship between her audience and her material. In particular, the videos—curated clips from popular films about education—were intended to "make the viewer place themselves in" the approaches to education she was exploring. Brenda could have

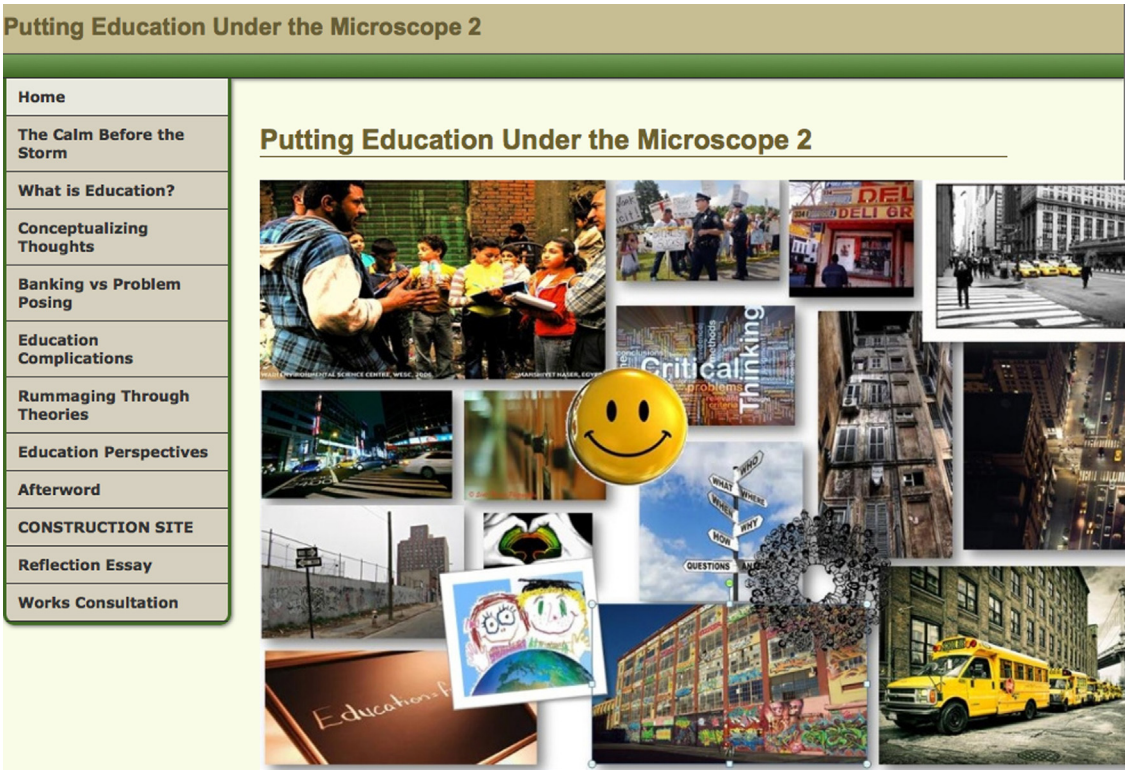

Figure 2. Brenda's Homepage.

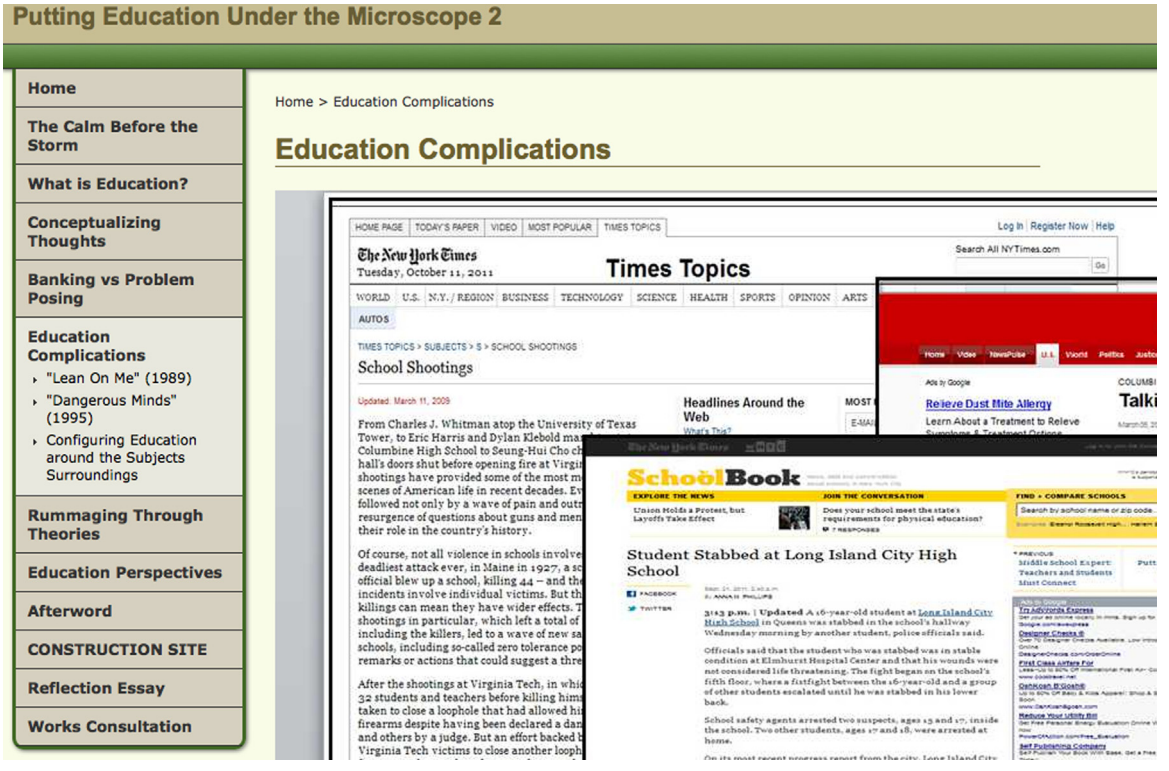

Figure 3. Sample pages of Brenda's eportfolio.

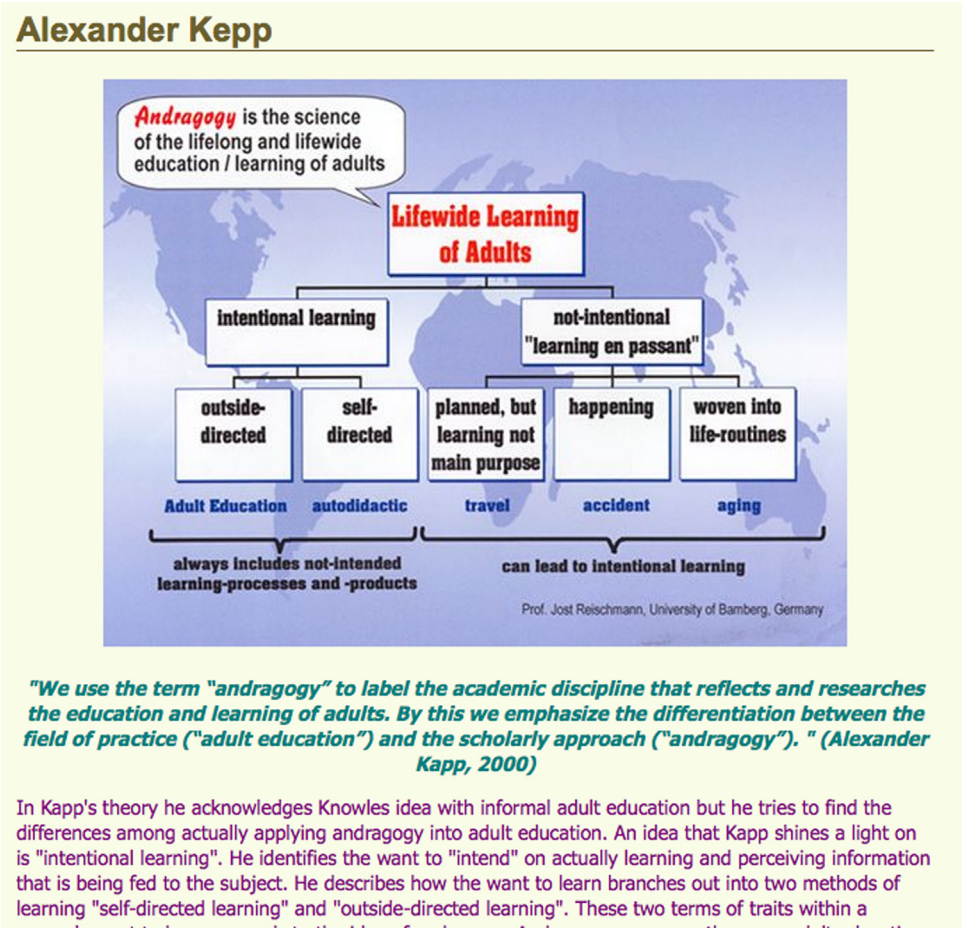

Figure 4. Sample pages of Brenda's eportfolio.

simply written *about* the films, but it was important to her that readers/viewers experience not only her words, but also the images and sounds of the films.[12] She hoped her readers/viewers would be able to *inhabit* the ideas she was exploring. So she used multimodality to create an interface that performed contexts of reception.

Consider one more example. Brenda's "Reflective Essay," like many students', included a photograph of a reflection in water—in this case depicting people walking along a canal or river, their images mirrored in the water. As is often the case with such images, it is not clear which way is up, and therefore which image is "real" and which is reflection. While few students comment directly on these images, Brenda offered this observation:

> As seen in the picture above, the actual reality (E-Portfolio) setting is altered because its seen or described from a different perspective (the Reflection). . . What the viewer sees is the E-Portfolio, a series of compiled ideas, theories, and opinions that support an overall theme. In its shadow lies the reflection[;] this shows the back story of the overall E-Portfolio, "The Making of 'Putting Education Under a Microscope.'

Brenda suggested that when viewed from the shadows, the eportfolio was changed; the "shadow" provided a context in which to interact with the eportfolio. In this moment, Brenda worked multimodally—returning us to the image through her alphabetic exposition—to perform a context in which our experience of the eportfolio was not simply enriched, but recontextualized.

[12] The fact that some of the videos have been taken down by copyright holders underscores the "temporarily stabilized" (Brooke, 2009) nature of this text.

Context of production

Another way to frame Brenda's powerful insight is to suggest that the context of production can perform another context of reception. Understanding how and where and under what context a text was created can provide a new context for meaning making and for interacting with that text.

Brenda's recreation of the context of the production of her eportfolio was confined to two pages—"CONSTRUCTION SITE" and "Reflection Essay"—neither of which is heavily multimodal. It's interesting to consider how this work could be done more multimodally—screenshots? Photos or video captures of the writer at work? Eye-scanning software? In any event, Brenda included a few images—a photo of a construction site, the reflection photo—but these pages feature primarily alphabetic text, perhaps because they mostly house documents created in and for the writing classroom, which Brenda may associate chiefly with words.

It is worth noting, however, that Brenda presented these classroom artifacts—brainstorms, progress reports, work plans, her teacher's prompts and her answers to them—in their original format (indeed, she may have typed them into the eportfolio in the first instance). Here, for example, is a sample of Brenda's "work plans":

For 9/30:

- Continue formulating ideas for structure of eportfolio
- See a peer tutor
- Decide how I will use multimedia to enhance eportfolio

For 10/4:

- Keep drafting new idea
- Think of a structure ot organiza [sic] my tabs by
- Start to think about how I will lay out my eportfolio (tabs, etc.) and how that will tie in with the themes of my project
- Look for other forms of research that can strenghten [sic] my main points

This visual presentation of the work plans reinforced the experience of the "CONSTRUCTION SITE" as an archive of raw artifacts, allowing readers/viewers to *see*, to encounter, Brenda's process—perhaps even to "inhabit" it. Indeed, the two process pages, each of which included several subpages, go beyond revealing the composer's goals for the work—though we get that, too—to offer a material, embodied performance of the context of production. We learn *what* Brenda did: drafted her ideas in the eportfolio platform itself; organized and reorganized as her ideas developed and became clearer; worked out "the meaty part of [her] theme/idea" in alphabetic text and then worked with visuals, which helped her to see the overall organization; went back through her analysis and incorporated personal experiences; and finally "add[ed] color, personality, differen[ce] and individuality." But we also learn *how* she did this work: with whom she met and when, how much and what kind of work she did on any given day, what kinds of media she had access to and which she did not, how she paced the work, etc. Consider how Brenda described her interaction with the eportfolio technology:

> being able to sign into TaskStream and add to my E-portfolio from wherever I had internet access is truly very accessible and manageable for me. I can easily work in it whenever an idea pops into my head. I think having the ability to constantly go back edit, add, exchange and move around certain parts of my E-portfolio is extremely beneficial to my project.

While Brenda's performance of the context of the production of her eportfolio was not highly multimodal, we can see that she created an interface that allowed her to perform that context in considerable detail and in a way that makes evident her material, embodied experience as she developed the eportfolio.

I have kept Brenda's writing mostly unedited here to underscore an important point: while her prose bears characteristics we associate with "basic writers," she was able to design an interface that somewhat effectively performs contexts of both reception and production. She demonstrated an understanding of how to work multimodally to shape encounters between and among herself, her material, the technology, and readers/viewers. Compare

Brenda's interface, for instance, with this one, which was also submitted to my program's eportfolio collection site:

Fig. 5

Figure 5. Student eportfolio homepage.

While this screen interface may be serviceable for uploading and finding artifacts, there is no evidence that the student has thought, as Brenda has, about how to use multimodality to create an *interface-as-encounter*: to perform contexts of reception or production. The screen interface may as well have been (and perhaps it was) presented *to* the student. But the point is that Brenda demonstrated an ability to use multiple modes to perform contexts of reception and production, and this student—like those who simply upload a series of documents to one long home page—did not.

Conclusion

While it is generally agreed that context is critical to multimodal writing, and therefore to multimodal writing assessment, we lack a workable theory of context that allows us to account for it in meaningful ways in writing assessment situations.

Drawing on Collin Gifford Brooke's notion of interface as a performance, Jody Shipka's discussion of the ways that multimodal texts create contexts of production, and Kathi Yancey's suggestion that some multimodal texts also recreate contexts of production, I have attempted here to sketch a theory of context that refuses to think of context as prior to and outside of texts but rather positions texts and contexts as mutually constitutive. In particular, I have been interested in the ways in which multimodal texts perform contexts of production and reception. This performance-based theory of context, I suggest, is both consistent with multimodal meaning-making and—compared to attempting to account for the irreducibly complex surround of writers and writing—far more practicable for writing assessment.

Certainly we cannot bracket the surround entirely, and nor should we. Indeed, as with any assessment criterion, context performance must be defined, interpreted, and assessed locally, as part of a working construct of "writing." But we can look to the multimodal text itself—partially bounded, temporarily stabilized at the level of the interface—for how it renders that surround, in terms of contexts of reception and production. In particular, we can look at the ways in which composers work multimodally—that is, use multimodality—to perform these contexts. As Shipka (2005, 2011, 2013) showed, performing contexts is a critical component of all multimodal composing. Whether students are designing digital texts or not, *performing context matters* in multimodal composing. Multimodal writing assessment should attempt to account for this important rhetorical work. If in doing so it encourages us as teachers to place more emphasis on helping students use multimodality to design effective interfaces, all the better.

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