Shifting Paradigms: Assessment and Technology in the Composition Classroom


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In primary school my father used an inkwell. Mistakes were corrected by scratching out or starting over. In the 1970s, I was afforded the luxury of using a pencil. Mistakes and revisions were as easy as erasing and then rewriting through a dim smudge left on the page. Technology continued to advance, and when I began teaching in the early 1990s, computer writing labs and word processing areas could be found in almost every school. Suddenly, students could fix mistakes without having to retype an entire page, or they could magically move entire passages from one section of an essay to another with the swipe of the mouse. But in the last decade of the twentieth century, school computers were often still a tool of the written word, not much more than expensive typewriters, primarily used as a convenience to accelerate the writing process.

Computers are much more than word processing machines. With the integration of the World Wide Web, hypertext documents, e-mail, instant messaging text phones, and so on, the very nature of the *word* as a form of communication is changing. We no longer laugh, we *LOL*. When we find ourselves too long in front of our computer screen, we announce *BRB*. We do not simply read text, we click on it. No longer are we limited to the confines of...
the printed page, but our words and ideas travel around the world in seconds. Peer reading is not confined to the same circle, the same room, or even the same continent. Blogs and chat rooms have replaced the water cooler, student commons, and meeting room. It is at the very heart of these changes that Carl Whithaus begins *Teaching and Evaluating Writing in the Age of Computers and High-Stakes Testing* and questions how we as teachers address these new forms of communication both within our own pedagogical understanding of composition and rhetoric and in response to assessment. The core of Whithaus’s argument is not just to encourage composition/rhetoric teachers, at all levels, to begin using technology as both a means of composing and a valuable instrument of the composition itself. Whithaus takes an admittedly unique stance by focusing on the need to approach technology within the scope of the evaluation process. We as teachers need to understand how students are using technology as a means to approach literature and how these approaches are juxtaposed with forms of high-stakes testing. Teachers, he argues, must be prepared to revise their own ways of teaching composition if we are going to more closely align testing outcomes, classroom expectations, and the career goals of our students with the academic needs of preparing them for assessment situations while at the same time focusing on the real world relevancy of composition.

Whithaus begins by addressing the difficulties associated with the task of evaluating student compositions — in both the realm of the traditional human reader(s) and the developing trend of automated computer-based scoring software. This problem is grounded in what he defines as “multimodal” forms and contexts of composition that ultimately produce an equally varied code of accepted outcomes. There have been a number of linguistic studies that address the issue of code switching in the context of verbal and written communication, especially as it relates to communicating through cultural boundaries. The ability to code switch becomes vital to both sender and receiver. If neither is able (or willing) to adapt to a shifting mode of communication, the message breaks down and is lost. Such a belief is always in the background of this book. Whithaus argues that readers, teachers, and students must be prepared to approach writing as a fluid form of communication that is being shaped by the technology driving it. Without the ability to code switch at the level of emerging forms of technology and accept a changing form of composition, the message is at risk. As Whithaus seems to imply throughout the book, the message is directly related to, and often overshadowed by, assessment.

Readers of *Pedagogy* are familiar with the difficulties facing composi-
tion teachers as they respond to student work, both in providing formative feedback and in finally assigning a grade. Whithaus takes us into his classroom on the first couple of days of a term, and through specific examples illustrates how he determines grading criteria for a particular class. His students are empowered to decide how written works are to be evaluated, and Whithaus points out the need for students to be involved in this process, both as a means to take ownership of their own work and to see the relevance of assessment as a part of the writing process. Whithaus addresses a common approach to classroom teaching by allowing his students to have a voice in defining the outcomes of evaluation, but few would find this a new revelation. The primary issue seems not to be recognizing the need for student engagement but instead determining how to implement such a change in a productive manner. While the book provides specific detail to demonstrate the process of student empowerment, there is little emphasis on the need to frame class discussion to move toward certain predetermined outcomes. The example group of students ultimately, and perhaps a bit too easily, came up with a list of criteria that was sensible and well thought out. I have no doubt that the anecdote came as a true reflection of one of those happy teachable moments, but the discussion may have proven more beneficial as an instructional tool had the outcome been more difficult. I found myself asking on more than one occasion, “Yes, but what if . . . ?” Whithaus provides enough in the way of extraneous classroom detail, such as the mechanism for opening the windows, to place his reader alongside him in the room; however, he fails to address the most important of “real-life” issues, that of how to address a pedagogical strategy when it insists on moving in an unproductive direction.

Whithaus goes on to emphasize the importance of establishing a real and relevant dialogue in association with students’ writing, both in the drafting phase and as a part of the finished product. There are a number of specific examples, especially from the secondary education environment, where student interaction can often be the most difficult. These examples demonstrate how the Internet can be used to share student work and encourage feedback, but how to get students involved with each other in the process of writing seems to be little more than good common sense. What is missing is the difficulty students and teachers face in developing these writing situations. Again, I found myself asking, “Yes, but what if . . . ?”

The computer also becomes a vital component in the new ways in which students are able to share their work, and Whithaus points to the necessity of incorporating such a consideration into the design of lessons.
However, the discussion posits the computer as a logical means of communicating but, alas, does not address how technology helps with issues not specifically related to creating the work. For instance, Whithaus does not address how or why the computer provides a better forum than, say, the student conference. He also does not address the most common pedagogical difficulties associated with using the computer to help facilitate these discussions. As a result, this too seems to be an overview of common sense, with a somewhat shallow development of practical material that a teacher could employ in his or her classroom.

I do not mean to be as critical of this work as I may sound to this point. Whithaus is raising quite relevant concerns related to the changing form of an effective composition classroom, and I agree that we must change the way we approach both teaching and evaluation. This is probably best articulated in chapter 7, “High-Stakes Testing and Twenty-First-Century Literacies.” Whithaus uses a creative opening to set the stage for a writing course he taught in New York designed to assist students in passing a required standardized writing assessment before they could go on to Composition 1. This leads to an interesting and I believe accurate reflection of the No Child Left Behind Act, which on the surface is designed to better educate the precollege student but in fact hurts academic development. Because these tests must be assessed in large numbers, they are based on concepts easily illustrated in a twenty-minute test writing session. Whithaus explains that to do so does not create a realistic environment for writing and as such places an emphasis on only the most superficial five-point composition. Such writing does not consider the deeper elements of context vital to the true academic and professional needs of advanced-level composition. Teachers ultimately, and unfortunately, turn to teaching the test.

From the earlier examples the reader is able to now see the flaws of the thinking in No Child Left Behind and how it ultimately does a disservice to composition pedagogy, producing students who learn and teachers who teach, a dumbed-down view of how rhetoric works in the real world.

Throughout the book, Whithaus emphasizes that technology must be used as a tool to improve good teaching, not as a means to replace it or to imply that teachers who have some essence of technology as a part of their curriculum are somehow providing better lessons for their students. In this light, the book focuses most heavily on the use of automated essay scoring software and blogs in the writing process. Here again the focus is on the changing dynamic of composition and the problem that computer-based scoring programs have in differentiating a high score from a low one. The
problem, and one that should be evident to anyone with even a limited understanding of how composition works, is that a computer must base its scoring rubric on a very rigid template, and this, as Whithaus points out, assumes “that any form of writing, including academic writing, will always obey the same criteria” (117). The fallacy of such thinking is obvious.

Blogs, on the other hand, can be important tools because they encourage a free form of effective communication. In this style of composition, the emphasis is on getting an idea across to the reader. Sometimes that idea is founded in the sense of a very formal and strictly stylized rhetorical structure, but more often than not it is based on a loose grammatical structure that places a greater emphasis on the message than on a particular formal construction.

Ultimately there can be a connection between the rigid and the loose, illustrated by the use of the electronic portfolio, which can maintain a standard established in the world of high-stakes testing, a world that ultimately places seemingly unnatural constraints on the form of composition outside the parameters of communication. But the electronic portfolio also encourages the use of multimodal forms of presentation even while being constructed of the more formal styles of assessed composition. Whithaus suggests that by using electronic portfolios, the teacher can bridge the gap between the need for effective communication in a world where electronic forms of media are vital and the need to instruct students to be prepared for the more rigid constraints placed on composition by the world of high-stakes standardized testing.

The book closes with a presentation of three different student essays as a way to compare the standard print-based composition with a hypertext and visually stimulating compositional presentation. Whithaus’s goal, one I feel he achieves quite well, is to bring all of the strings of the book together in the examples (including a clever approach: a sample student work on string theory) to illustrate the results of multimodal forms of rhetorical expression. At the end, as in the earlier sections of the book, Whithaus pushes for the use of visuals within a composition, but not simply as an added feature to drive the text. He calls for, and this is what he seems to be leading to all along, a complete paradigm shift in the way we approach the teaching of composition. Visuals and hypertext media should be considered not as add-ons to standard forms of purely textual compositions but as a central part of a holistic rhetorical process. Only when these more technical forms of composing are incorporated from the inside out, instead of remaining on the periphery, will they become valued tools in the process of composition.
How to approach technology as an inherent component of composition and not simply as an exterior tool is an important question facing the composition/rhetoric classroom both at the high school level and in the post-secondary environment. But throughout the book Whithaus does not offer any specific methods for shifting the old paradigms that are losing touch with the realities of the modern, technology-based culture. The book merely poses the problem and provides a number of relevant and interesting examples. It seems Whithaus misses a vital component: how to implement these changes. The book is successful at situating the problem — one that I would argue is not as transparent, especially to those in the field, as Whithaus would lead his reader to believe. But perhaps I am being too optimistic in this regard. While the book points the readers in a positive direction, and we are certainly prepared to follow the author into the technological realm of student composition, he ends before the most difficult and important work is achieved: providing us with an equally well-thought-out plan to implement many of his suggestions.

Even though the book feels as if it has stopped short of where it ultimately needs to go, Whithaus provides a strong theoretical framework from which to build. As he asserts, we can no longer see the computer as simply a writing tool to be used to more easily create and edit single-dimensional textual composition, and we must find ways to revise our way of thinking about the relationship between text and multimodal forms of communication. Only then can we reassess the role of high-stakes testing in evaluating our next generation of students.
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