A NEW KIND OF READING AND WRITING SPACE: THE ONLINE COURSE SITE

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This article examines theoretical contexts for such reading, and suggests links between theory, pedagogy, and student perspectives.

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Whether the traditional bricks-and-mortar college writing classroom embraces current-traditional, social epistemic, cognitivist, postmodern, expressive, feminist, or liberatory pedagogy, its work throughout the semester can be considered as a story that can be read in the course documents and in the assignments students write. The syllabus, outlining processes with a beginning, middle, and end, embodies narrative structure and expectations. Action will begin; assignments will support and expand it; students will struggle with and (we all hope) master a major project or so (this is the climax/es). Through this process they will learn (i.e., have an epiphany), and reflect afterward, as they integrate what they've learned into their existing knowledge (denouement or resolution). The hierarchical nature of power relations in such a classroom—the teacher teaches, evaluates, and tells or writes while the students learn, listen, and read—echoes its essentially sequential structure. Thus the expected modus operandi in such classrooms is structured around narrative, hierarchy, and reading.

Students enrolled in this traditional classroom can predict, assess, or "read" its story based upon their prior experience: its rhetorical situations, power relations, requirements, personalities, expectations, and responsibilities. They have spent years becoming familiar with

its discourses, codes, and arrangements, and most students can navigate such classrooms skillfully, if not successfully. If something goes wrong, it's not because they're in an undecipherable situation; they are familiar with the classroom as a genre.

Gunther Kress (1999) advances this argument in "English at the Crossroads," an essay that addresses the impact of online and other cybernetic components on the English curriculum. Instead of the narrative-hierarchy-reading paradigm with which most postsecondary English students and teachers are so familiar, Kress asserts that the introduction of online components or entire courses online foregrounds display and arrangement rather than narrative (p. 82) and use rather than reading (p. 68). (You'll notice I've walked around hierarchy, which I'll return to later: this piece is not a sparkly-eyed claim that the online course is a site for empowering students, although it is certainly more convenient for some of them.)

The linchpin of Kress's argument is the turn from a textual to a visual method of presentation in such courses. He writes,

> The visual is taking over many aspects of written language. This [is] a shift from the temporal-sequential logic of spoken (and to a lesser extent written) language to the spatial-simultaneous logic of the visual . . . a shift from text as cohesively and coherently organized representation of the world to be read, to the notion of unorganized semiotic resources to be used. This parallels and reinforces the move away from narrative. (p. 68)

It also, perhaps, reinforces the move away from the college writing classroom as a story that may be outlined in program requirements, fleshed out to satisfying readability in syllabi, assignments, and notes, and understood by students, teachers, and administrators as a well-traveled highway. Ever mindful of student needs and administrative expectations, I work at composing my course documents as a coherent, unified, and readable narrative and hope that my classes' stories, as

they move through time and successively more challenging writing assignments, have happy endings. When I imported these documents onto an online course site, I felt I wasn't taking full advantage of opportunities teaching online might afford; in addition, I wondered what would happen to student expectations of the course's progress.

Most of my postsecondary writing students—almost all native speakers of English, half first-year students, half seniors—are quite skilled visual readers, too: they have been online for at least half their lives. But for the most part these experiences have been with commercial websites and pages, which can afford compelling, innovative display and arrangement. Further, few sites, no matter their source of funding, fulfill the promise of the Internet. Johndan Johnson-Eilola (1998) points out in "Negative Spaces" that although we frequently label the web grandiosely, as a collection of "collaborative hypertext," in fact most sites use hypertext "in a fairly conventional way" that is, in large part, nothing more nor less than personal public relations (p. 27), with a few links selected to persuade users of the site's value and authenticity.

As convention-bound as universities and writing instruction are by nature, it should thus be no surprise that pressures to continue business as usual in the context of the online course site are strong on both students and teachers. Or, as Marilyn Cooper (1999) writes, "The cavalier equation of 'decentered/networked' and 'egalitarian' results in a failure to acknowledge the strength and pervasiveness of dominant discourse spoken by students and by instructors" (p. 141). As a result, Blackboard, the course site software platform which my university has purchased, is somewhere in the middle between convention and collaboration, the visual and the textual, narrative and display, reading and use. Students can't read the online class in quite the same way as they do a more traditional course, nor do they utilize it as they would a recreational

website. Although it's not particularly difficult, Blackboard's rhetorical ambiguity unsettles those who would use (read) it.

The Blackboard course site opens on an Announcements page, where the instructor can post assignments, last-minute instructions, or reminders about the schedule. To the left of this is a strip of navigation buttons: course documents, communication, groups, links, discussion board, grade book, and so on. The teacher controls frame colors, what features students can access and how much access they have, although students can have their own cubicle-like web pages: a photo, e-mail address, and a few lines of personal text.

If a student presses the navigation button for the Discussion Board, a new screen appears containing all the class's discussion forums. The student can respond to a question posed by the teacher, respond to another student, or start a new thread. This process is collaborative hypertext, in a sense—creating links to someone else's discourse—yet at the same time it is sequential, structured around replies to the teacher's questions or another student's comments. A user cannot create links to any word or phrase in a discussion except textually, through description and quoting. Through parameters established on the course site's control panel, the teacher shapes the discourse.

This pattern, moving online conversation into smaller and smaller linear units, is typical of Blackboard's capabilities. And it's characteristic of modern and linear rather than postmodern and fragmented discourses. Kress (1999), examining sentence patterns in a 1936 science textbook, points out "The clauses are in a hierarchical arrangement in which the position of the clause in the hierarchy is an indication of its ontological, representational, and communicational significance" (p. 73). On the Web, Blackboard's discursive order follows a similar top-down format: here shapers and speakers and makers of meaning are, in order of magnitude, the

software's makers, the institution with all its contexts (which chose to purchase this platform and encourage its use with the liberal application of grant money and other incentives), the teacher, and the student. This order is not substantively different from that determining the shape of discourse in a traditional classroom, with the exception that there the state legislature or, for a private institution, another equally shadowy body, takes the place of the Blackboard's commercial license holder. Or, as Kress (1999) argues, "Hierarchical syntax serves the expression of the hierarchy of conceptual organization" (p. 73).

I have used Blackboard components in classes for the past three semesters, and I am now teaching English 102, the second semester course of first year writing, entirely online. Last semester I surveyed my English 102 students about Blackboard's ease of use (not ease of reading—Blackboard seems to possess sequence but not narrative, display but little opportunity for arrangement). At the same time, I surveyed students in sophomore and senior level nonfiction writing classes about the same thing—Blackboard's navigability—and also asked them to rank metaphors for the website gleaned from theoretical considerations about the nature of online discourse. I asked these students to suggest their own metaphors for such conversations. Finally, I asked them to offer suggestions for making their course site or the applications I had chosen easier to use.

Overall, students found Blackboard's resources easy to use (rather than read). One wrote, "It's fairly straightforward," which seemed an apt comment given its structure. Problems students encountered had more to do with the university's administration of the site–last fall it crashed or went down several times, so students could not log on. They complained about being timed out if they write online, about access speeds on their home computers if they did not have

a DSL connection, or about other computer problems that were not related to Blackboard. Verbal comments I had heard about difficulties using Blackboard were not borne out by the surveys.

I asked these students to check all metaphors about websites that applied to their Blackboard course site from this list: coffee house, meeting place, collection, framework or scaffold, interactive fiction, bus route, straight line from the course's beginning to end, layers, digital confetti. Most frequently selected were coffee house or meeting place ("but we're not all there at the same time," one student commented in parentheses), bus route (another noted that the stops are not in order), layers, and digital confetti ("if you mean it is scattered," another wrote), with "collection" and then "framework or scaffold" following in frequency of selection.

The next question asked students for their own metaphors to describe the process of using Blackboard. There were hyperbolic disparagements—"slow train to China," "a hurricane," "a wart hog from hell"—but others were more thoughtful and thought-provoking. One student said Blackboard provided a "helping hand." But others compared it to "a maze," a "building with multiple floors—doors to go in and separate ones to leave through," "an onion," and "a post office with boxes," (I especially liked the last because to me using Blackboard is a lot like lunching at one of the old New York automats.), or "hide and seek—sometimes I wonder if I am missing something crucial because I did not look in the right spot." Such responses indicate the tensions inherent between hypertext, with its visual-spatial arrangements, and the hierarchical, sequential, linear nature of the classroom's narrative discourses. Given the online course site's purpose and institutional nature, such tensions appear inevitable.

Students' suggestions for improving Blackboard involve easier access to the screens they need: "If the categories didn't have so many sub-categories that have sub-categories of their own," one wrote, "I could find things easier." They also mentioned a spell-and-grammar check

for online writing and better use of color: one textual and two visual suggestions. They had few ideas for making Blackboard more open, although many noted the embedded qualities of its discourse. In a brief discussion after one class had completed the survey, one woman commented that Blackboard "should be like one of those choose-your-own-adventure stories."

"That's interactive fiction," I replied. "And yes, that's a great idea." Her concept of the online course site as an interactive, collaborative narrative seems a promising start to exploring the possibilities of such sites. Perhaps my lack of technological expertise, coupled with lots of experience in bricks-and-mortar classrooms centered upon narrative and reading has kept me from translating her ideas into assignments that would make better use of Blackboard.

Thus it seems that students are quite well aware that Blackboard is a course site in search of its own location between the "action, event, speech, text" axis of the traditional classroom and the "visual, display, arrangement" (Kress, 1999, p. 79) axis of online discourse, but fails to find its niche in either mode. Student characterizations of Blackboard as part of the writing classroom's discourse do not belie the promise of teaching and learning online. But they do indicate in what ways our online classrooms are ill-equipped for what they must or could do, since hypertext conversations open up numerous possibilities besides that of the narrative progression characteristic of the traditional classroom.

In addition, since students and teachers in Blackboard can only operate "in the lanes," so to speak, with few opportunities to veer off the prescribed path of interaction or engage in random connection other than via e-mail, teaching online raises questions about power that traditional courses do not, in part because students are more skilled in reading the situations and expectations of such courses and are cognizant of ways they might approach its discourses of power. Their familiarity allows them to recognize and use the classroom's intersections as ad hoc

locations for empowerment: teacher's pet, class clown, late paper, excused absence, fabulous rewrite that excuses a multitude of sins. Most students have a pretty good idea of how to get the best grade with the least work—a venerable student goal. Much about these aspects of classroom power relations do not change in online classes. In pointing out how traditional these relationships continue to be in the online classroom, Marilyn Cooper (1999) asserts, "The cavalier equation of 'decentered/intertextual' and 'egalitarian' results in a failure to acknowledge the strength and pervasiveness of dominant discourses spoken both by students and by instructors" (p. 141).

But the online course site, because of its nature as both visual and textual meaning-making, adds another layer of which students may be less aware. Corporations rather than educational institutions have been the leading developers and purveyors of visual discourses: as Kress (1999) notes, contemporary textbooks are arranged in accordance with an advertising model of display-arrangement-use, something to dip into and cherry-pick from, rather than the older strategy of narrative reading of a text written to be covered from start to finish in a course with a clear and obvious beginning and end (pp. 70-77).

Our eager adoption of a model derived from commerce, at the same time that federal, state, and local governments have become less interested in or able to adequately fund education is a stance that could be questioned. In the online course site, who is speaking? Who is the audience? What is the subject? Are there shadow purveyors of meaning and meaning-making, or is everything strictly and only as it appears to be?

Kress (1999) argues that the narrative-reading paradigm, derived as it is from speech, facilitates education as preparation for citizenship: governments perceive it is in their best interests to pay for such education, to the best of their ability. By contrast, the display-

arrangement-use strategy may focus more on training consumers, less on educating citizens by means of narrative and public debate (p. 88). Thus both form and source funding call into question the electronic classroom's goals and purposes; everyone involved—students, teachers, and the institutions espousing such instructional sites—could profit from careful examination of the online course's contexts, connotations, and sites of power. In light of the online course site's rapid expansion, such scrutiny is already overdue.

I am tempted, here, to write that we need story, not arrangement; debate rather than display; reading more than use. But perhaps we need both, remembering with George and Shoos (1999) that "Representation is never innocent. It has real effects and repercussions" (p.125). Another way of looking at students' responses to reading the online course site is that privileging visual rhetorics over textual, or vice versa, omits information and ways of structuring meaning and power that we need. Teaching online can be more inclusive and collaborative, perhaps even more so than what's possible in the bricks-and-mortar classroom. We need new approaches to teaching, different ways of looking at assignments, and perhaps some different software to make it happen—and we need to think about where that software came from, and what it means to use it. We need, in short, to develop a new understanding and practice of critical literacy, and then to read/use/forge ahead.

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