



Short-form writing: Studying process in the context of contemporary composing technologies

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that writing studies scholarship has little understanding of what happens when writers compose the short-form, networked writing which is increasingly prevalent across the culture. Situated within the existing broad disciplinary understanding of writing and technology as cultural practices with literacy, data-based pictures of what writers are doing *in situ* with contemporary writing technologies provide an additional necessary layer of understanding to the ways writing technologies intersect with and impact what writers do with language. I argue that as a field we should also pay close, systematic attention to writers' writing processes, in particular, developing an understanding of writers composing with short-form, interactive writing. I build these arguments through analysis of examples drawn from a study of eight Facebook writers' composing processes captured in think-aloud screencast videos.

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What does *writing* mean? We live in a world where writing increasingly signifies an ever expanding variety of meaning-making practices. Whereas the word itself (“writing”) might suggest a homogenous object, even as literacy is always about something besides a graphic use of language, so is writing always *about something*. We don't just write; we write about something. As we modify “writing” with various adjectives, the implied homogeneity explodes with possibility depending on descriptions of place (school, workplace, civic, social, and bureaucratic settings), form (informal, formal, generic, elaborated, short-form), mode (linguistic, multimodal, visual), technology (interactive, distributed, synchronous or asynchronous), accessibility (private or public, archived) and audience (one writer addressing an individual or many known or unknown others). These various iterations of our field's key term, writing, change—in both small and more significant ways—the challenges to writers in terms of their rhetorical context, purpose, and audience: *bureaucratic* writing (for example, completing a hospital admissions form, texts in a human resources job file, or applications for various kinds of licenses) is quite a distinct rhetorical task as compared to *academic* writing; and even further, *informal academic* writing (weekly reflective journals, listserv postings, planning for compositions) is quite distinct from *formal academic* writing (composing final essays or research reports in which elaborated, essayist, edited American English and other formal features are expected). Though there is overlap among the types of writing, one commonality is the manipulation of a complex symbol system as a means of communicating human

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thought from one person to others.¹ The technologies through which these types of writing are created, distributed, received, read, and archived also involve the use of signs and symbols to complete the complex task of communication. Increasingly in contemporary life, writing of every type is *internetworked* writing, a term James Porter (1998) used to describe the technological environments where writing is composed and circulated: “Internetworked writing differs from networked writing in that it involves writing for and on the Internet. . . . [I]nternetworked writing also refers to more than simply *posting* text: It includes reading, browsing, and collecting electronic text, as *research* activities that are also types of *writing* activities” (p. 2). That is, internetworked writing refers to writing activities mediated by networked writing tools (such as internet browsers, social networking sites, synchronous video calling programs accessed through wired and wireless computers, tablets, iPads, and mobile phones). Internetworked writing is a concept that keeps our vision focused on writing in people’s lives as those lives are mediated through a variety of networked writing tools.

Writing that is digitally mediated and distributed plays a prominent and ever-present role in almost every scene of literate practice across 21st-century American culture. Gunther Kress (2003) suggested that within these changing global and multimodal contexts in which written language is situated, “writing is undergoing changes of a profound kind: in grammar and syntax, particularly at the level of the sentence, and at the level of the text/message” (p. 21). Though providing a crucial theoretical context for understanding multimodal literacy, Kress (2003) did not turn his attention to what writers do when they write. In this, he is not alone. Multimodal composing, contemporary composing technologies, and internetworked literate contexts are the central focus of computers and composition scholarship, but we have little disciplinary understanding of how writers write and how language is shaped within technologically-mediated literate practices. Although there is a core of scholars in computers and writing—and rhetoric and writing more broadly—who call attention to the fact that our students write, and write a lot, there is little scholarship that deeply attends to the practices, processes, and larger social, cultural, and technological ecology in which this writing is happening. In this article, I argue that we need richer understandings of what writers do when they compose the short-form, internetworked writing increasingly required across a variety of literate contexts. Findings about writing based on elaborated, essayist composing practices may be changing in significant ways as writers are faced with rhetorical situations involving short-form, internetworked composing. To understand the rhetorical, cognitive, and social demands short-form, internetworked writing makes on writers, I argue that we must pay attention to *writing as a process*, and that such an understanding is best arrived at through data-based, *in situ* studies of what writers are actually doing with contemporary writing technologies. Specifically, I elaborate on these arguments by, drawing on examples from multiple research projects I’ve undertaken in the last several years. The fine-grained analyses of writers’ short-form composing processes suggest the richness of the meaning-making literate practices informing what are too often dismissed as trivial texts. My hope is that future work will reveal in even further detail the complexity of composing processes using contemporary writing technologies; in this article, I turn to data from studies I’ve conducted to demonstrate the value of more data-based studies of contemporary composing processes. I argue that the complexity of composing processes suggested even by this small window onto the composing in Facebook demonstrates the importance of studying actual writers’ short-form composing processes *in situ*.

1. Composing process research and contemporary composing technologies

Since the early 1980s, computers and composition scholars have been building a complex understanding of myriad forms of technologically-mediated writing practices, composing processes, and written forms. Against the backdrop

¹ Indeed, the types of writing I’ve identified here all satisfy Marvin Diogenes and Andrea Lunsford’s definition of writing:

Writing: A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and *per-forming* lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media. (as cited in Lunsford, 2006, p. 171).

Recognizing that understandings of writing and reading are changing, Diogenes and Lunsford (2006) took up the challenge posed by what they call “our vocabulary problem” and constructed this definition of writing. Although Lunsford (2006) acknowledged the difficulties of composing a definition that “does not mirror the reductiveness of current dictionary definitions” (170), the move to more expansive definitions of writing teeter a fine line between specificity and an expansiveness that fails to signify.

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