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Beyond Student as User: Rhetoric, Multimodality, and User-Centered Design

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Abstract

User-centered design (UCD) as a concept has begun to enter composition studies, particularly through scholar-teachers of technical communication. We question further incorporation—specifically, the collision course of industry-driven language such as "efficiency" and "expediency" and the potential positioning of students as "users" in the composition classroom. We argue that this positioning places us in unproductive opposition to multimodal composition. Rather than a wholesale incorporation of UCD into the composition classroom, we outline a "theory + play" approach that combines scholarship in rhetoric, speculative design, and multimodal composition. This approach, we argue, better aligns with the political and social investments of Johnson's (1998) theory of user-centered technology, in which our students are critical makers and engaged citizens in the public sphere.
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Keywords: User-centered design; User Experience; Rhetoric; Multimodality; Pedagogy

1. Introduction

The end of an art is not a product, but the use made of an artistic construct. The end of the art of housebuilding, for example, is neither the builder's use of the art nor the house itself, but rather the use made of the home by those for whom it was constructed. Similarly, the end of rhetoric is an active response in the auditor not the speech itself (Lauer & Atwill, 1995, p. 29).

Understanding the current relationship between user-centered design (UCD) and composition studies means understanding the histories of usability, UCD, and user experience (UX) in industry, as well as understanding which aspects of these have made their way into composition—and which ones have not. These histories, then, inform and complicate a UCD-informed pedagogy. We explore this later in the essay through our offering of a multimodality-meets-UCD pedagogical framework.

Usability and technical communication have a "long, intertwined history" since the 1970s, or the emergence of usability as a field in industry (Redish, 2010). There is a large body of scholarship in technical communication focused on usability and user-centered design (e.g., Johnson, 1998; Salvo, 2001; Scott, 2008). This scholarship emphasizes the design and testing of digital technologies, although the contexts have expanded to other services, products, and

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Fig. 1. Quesenbery's origins of user experience (Redish, 2010).

processes (e.g., Moore, 2016). Technical communication and rhetoric and composition often cross-pollinate because of their proximity in English departments and because of the teacher-scholars who often work in both areas. As a result, usability has made its way into rhetoric and composition interpolated through technical communication.

UX is a recently emergent field in industry, drawing on the history of usability but adding in scope, combining usability, information architecture, content strategy, and other areas. UX brings together industry professionals with backgrounds in many disciplines (see Fig. 1). As shown in Fig. 1, technical communication claims an affiliation with UX through both intersections in approaches (moving from purely usability to user-centered design, content strategy, and UX) and in the skillsets of technical communicators now working as UX professionals (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016; Redish & Barnum, 2011). To the extent that technical communication affiliates itself with the UX industry, it often adopts its vocabulary. One example is the term user-centered design (UCD), defined by UX consultant Jesse James Garrett (2010) as "the practice of creating engaging, efficient user experiences" (p. 17).

Garrett's (2010) definition of UCD extends the definition offered by technical communication scholar Michael Salvo (2001), who wrote that "User-centered design is a process of collecting data from users, creating feedback in the form of information, and then delivering that information to designers" (p. 286). Salvo works to situate UCD as a process incorporating usability throughout the design process, and also to position UCD as more iterative and robust than usability at the end of a design process, but less so than participatory design methods. Salvo's piece was written before the rapid growth of the field of UX in industry, and Garrett's definition of UCD reflects this understanding of UCD as a part of a larger UX industry. As Ginny Redish (2010) argued, "Much current narrative about UX and usability in the web world comes from information architects and interaction designers who were not a part of the early days of the human factors [origin] story, the software development story, or the technical communication story" (p. 191). Scholarship in technical communication on UCD has tended to focus more on process (researchers and designers consulting with users throughout the design process, and creating space for this consultation) than defining for what they should be consulted. John D. Gould and Clayton Lewis (1985) suggest that users' "characteristics, needs, and wishes" should be taken into account throughout the design process, as a part of their widely-cited definition of UCD in technical communication scholarship (see, e.g., Van Velsen, van de Geest, & Steehouder, 2010). Garrett's use of "engaging" and "efficient," then, is a UCD that includes both concepts of usability and UX.

The wholesale transfer of UCD as adopted by technical communication and/or the UX industry creates cognitive dissonance for scholar/teachers attempting to make a place in rhetoric and composition for UCD. Indeed, Salvo described this tension in a UCD project in which he moved from a technical communicator to rhetorician: "Prior to the Purdue OWL usability project, I believed I was acting as a user-centered rhetorician in my role as professional technical writer by completing tasks and presenting information based in user-centered theory. But my lack of experience in