Contextualizing Cyber Compositions for Cultures: A Usability-Based Approach to Composing Online for International Audiences

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Abstract

The global diffusion of online media means individuals are increasingly composing web texts for international readers. To do so effectively, writers need to understand the expectations and preferences cultural and national audiences associate with using online materials – particularly where they are used, when, and how. The usability concept of personas – or archetypes of an audience – can help writing students research and understand such aspects. Personas do so by focusing research on viewing readers/users as distinct groups within greater social and cultural contexts. This article explains how writing instructors can user persona-related activities to help composition students address contextual factors when writing online texts for international and intercultural audiences.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, individuals increasingly compose web texts for audiences in different local, regional, and international contexts. Writing students need to understand how these contexts affect the ways audiences access and use online texts. The user-experience design/usability concept of *personas* can help students understand such factors. It does so by expanding ideas of audience to include the contexts in which individuals compose or read online.

Personas are architypes of a particular audience that might use a text. In usability studies, they examine how different groups use items in various settings. As such, they can provide insights on where individuals use technologies to engage in activities. These include settings where persons access, interact with, or compose online texts. In writing studies, personas can help students understand dynamics affecting online reading and writing practices in their own culture and in other cultural contexts. They thus create a new point from which writing students can begin studying the interconnected nature of audience and contexts in online writing spaces.

By integrating persona development and use into writing classes and curricula, instructors and program administrators can provide students with a tool for composing in online spaces. The complexity of such processes can be difficult to integrate all aspects of them into a single class. Writing instructors, however, can use different persona-related activities to help students create online texts for audiences from a range of cultures – including their own. Additionally, instructors can distribute such activities across different writing classes in a curriculum to help students understand context, culture, and online composition expectations in a more integrated and systematic way.

This entry overviews how personas can help students understand dynamics affecting the ways groups interact with online texts. The entry also reviews persona-related methods for researching the expectations and preferences cultural groups might have for online texts. In so doing, the entry presents an approach for integrating persona-related activities into different writing classes – from first-year writing to technical writing to capstone writing courses. The idea is to select the activity (or activities) that might work best with a writing course or courses and consider how to coordinate curriculum to examine ideas of audience and personas in a progressive way if possible.

2. THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF COMPOSING ONLINE

As Internet access expands, who interacts online continues to change. Each audience brings factors affecting how individuals access, use, and create web-based texts. Within a nation, these can include infrastructure, socioeconomic, and demographic variables (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). When expanded to international contexts, the complexities increase markedly. Moreover, this international context represents the greatest growth area for composing online.

2.1. International Expansion

International online access has grown almost 900% since the turn of the millennium and by some 2.5 billion persons in the last decade (Internet Usage Statistics, 2016; The 2006 Year-End Stats, 2009). Such growth will continue for some time – particularly in emerging economies. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), for example, online access almost tripled in the last decade and grew by 15.5 million persons between 2015–2016 alone (China's Internet Users, 2016). Similarly, some 460 million persons in India have online access – an increase of almost 90 million since 2015. Equally stunning is these individuals represent roughly one third of each nation's total population of 1.2 billion (India) and 1.7 billion (for China) (China's Internet Users, 2016; India Internet Users, 2016).

This growth is accompanied by increased comfort with interacting digitally. Brazil's consumers, for example, are expected to account for some $25 billion US in online sales in the near future (Herrera, 2013; Kligin, 2013). In the PRC, the online market accounts for roughly $590 billion US with roughly 380 million online shoppers and a growth rate of almost 55% each year (China's E-Commerce Market, 2016; Tong, 2016). The online market in India is similarly and expected to account for $120 billion US by 2020 (Dalal, 2016; India's E-Commerce Industry, 2016; Maheshwari, 2016). Yet this growth does not necessarily mean it will be easier to interact online with individuals from other cultures. Rather, numerous factors can affect how individuals around the world interact via online texts. Understanding such factors can be central to using online media to engage effectively with audiences from one's own culture and others.

2.2. Composing Challenges

For US students, the challenge becomes thinking of audience in ways that differ from their experiences. When writing online, individuals might think of their audience as individuals from different backgrounds, but existing within the context of one nation (e.g., the United States) where national laws create a uniformity affecting how to access, read, and create online texts. Similarly, the local environments experienced by students when composing online can influence how they think others use the web. Such factors can form the foundation students draw upon when conceptualizing "audience" as they write online and influence how they interact with others in online spaces.

The challenge for writing instructors involves helping students understand how individuals in other local and cultural contexts might have different experiences affecting their online interactions. To do so, writing teachers must

- Make students aware of how local factors can affect online writing practices in other contexts
- Provide students with critical thinking, research, and writing foundation for understanding such dynamics

This involves helping students consider audience in terms of the contexts where individuals create or interact with online texts. Such approaches need to involve practices that can be applied in different writing classes – from first-year writing to senior capstone courses – and across a writing curriculum.

Essentially, composition students need mechanisms to anticipate how individuals in other contexts use technologies to engage in online activities. Such a mechanism should examine more than *who* the members of a national or cultural