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Textual Curation

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Abstract

This article explores textual curation as a conceptualization of authorship and composition within large information structures that is heavily based on the canon of arrangement. This work is often undertaken through distributed collaboration, thus complicating traditional conceptions of authorial attribution and agency. Central curatorial processes include critical recomposition of prior texts along with the development of small and often invisible textual elements such as architecture, metadata, and strategic links. I offer a grounded definition of textual curation that draws from traditional curatorial fields such as Museum Studies and Library Science as well as Writing Studies' own subfield of Technical Communication, which focuses heavily on recomposed, collaboratively produced texts. Selected Wikipedia articles serve as case studies for examining live curatorial work in open, collaborative environments.
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"I wanted to teach students how to write the small texts that make the world turn," a mentor said to me one autumn afternoon years ago when I asked how she had come to teach writing. In the years since that conversation, the question has come up again and again in conversations with other writing teachers, and we always come back to the small things. We want to help students learn to make a good claim, develop an effective written argument, a solid rhetorical analysis, a well-told narrative. Each capable visual analysis, each accessibly designed web page, each competent podcast helps our students make the world turn. The same is true in even smaller textual units: a rhetorically effective tweet, a carefully styled sentence, a well-crafted phrase, an ethical citation.

We're comfortable with such small textual units, that is, as long as they're readily identifiable as essayistic writing. We want words, and quite a few of them—at least 140 characters, not only a word or two. Consequently, we tend to reserve for the technical communication classroom—or not teach at all—the often-invisible compositional skills that transform an informative website that contains words and images into a useable, accessible, unified text with searchable content. These strategic links, recomposed texts, metadata elements, and information architectures are suasive elements that contribute heavily to the ethos of digital arguments, and they help both writers and readers realize the full potential of digital environments.

In the years since Kathleen Blake Yancey's call for increased pedagogical attention to multimodal composition in 2004's "Made Not only in Words: Composition in a New Key" and later in the NCTE report *Writing in the 21st*

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Century (2009), writing in digital contexts and in social media has become an increasingly integral part of composition pedagogy. As a field, we've moved closer to naturalizing an understanding of writing more akin to the one that Andrea Lunsford proposed in her keynote address to the 2005 Computers and Writing Conference:

> Writing: A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing 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.* (p. 171, emphasis mine)

Since then, the generic landscape of the writing classroom has changed. Teachers and students at a wide range of institutions have taken up many forms of blogging, screencasting, podcasting, and video development, as well as emergent short genres such as tweets. However, as our attention to the many modes and mediums in which writing happens has grown, we have remained primarily concerned with recognizable essayistic writing, whether it be in a status update, a Vine, or a collaboratively written website. In these contexts, a carefully composed 140 character missive or a 6 second video can comprise a narrative argument. Even in assignments that are rich with generative discussions of ethical borrowing and remix, the composition of textual or visual communication frequently remains the sole object of assessment in digital composition classrooms. This focus is necessarily accompanied by a concentration on familiar genres that facilitate assessment of argumentation, narrative structure, style, and other textual facets that are quite similar to those of a more typical essay. Indeed, this is one of the common arguments deployed against naysayers when it comes to digital pedagogies: these digital assignments teach these same essential compositional and rhetorical aspects as print texts, but in dynamic digital environments that better prepare students for current work environments and acknowledge emergent communication practices.

As vital as these developments have been to our research, to our classrooms, and to our fulfillment of university missions, they do not yet usually offer a broad focus that includes the small and often invisible writing skills that are vital for managing both personal information ecologies and larger digital texts. This is partly due to the simple fact that good information architectures, carefully constructed taxonomies, and usable navigation elements such as metadata and strategic links are largely unnoticeable when done well, as is filtered information that has been recomposed with more attention to rhetorical effectiveness than to demonstrating the sort of original authorship most often valued in university writing. But it is also because we do not often really consider these forms of composition to be fully formed, essential writing skills that are vital elements of digital writing courses.

Nicotra (2009) powerfully addressed elements of this issue, arguing that understanding findability and information architecture as vital elements of composition is fundamental to teaching forms of digital literacy that account for the social, networked nature of contemporary writing. The discipline of rhetoric and composition has long been interested in rhetorical contexts of literacy, but as she argued, our comfortable ways of teaching essayistic writing no longer fully account for the ways that writing functions on the web:

> Now more than ever the focus is much more on the organization of the total network than on the individual producer of texts. . .the sheer amount of information with which we're dealing now and the medium in which it primarily occurs has perhaps given the importance of organization over individual authorship a heightened intensity. Thus, the issue of findability [and information structures] is an important one for contemporary rhetoric and composition. (p. 266)

She focused on folksonomic tagging in social sites like Flickr as an example of small, collaboratively produced texts that negotiate and facilitate persuasive findability. This distributed development of information taxonomies is both deeply rhetorical and indisputably categorized as writing, Nicotra contended, creating a space for students to develop grounded understandings of audience awareness and a metacritical awareness of network participation.

Teaching the full range of literacies necessary to develop a functional website that goes beyond a simple collection of smart textual and visual narratives requires helping students understand this product as part of the living ecology of humans and objects that make up the web. This move requires a fundamental reconsideration of which units and types of text constitute writing. Doing so, Johnson-Eilola (2005) wrote in his discussion of emergent reading processes and skills, requires us to

> learn to understand learning and work in new ways: Creativity is no longer the production of original texts, but *the ability to gather, filter, rearrange, and construct new texts*. . . Users need to have available to them as much

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