



Revisualizing Composition: How First-Year Writers Use Composing Technologies

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Abstract

Reporting on survey data from 1,366 students from seven colleges and universities, this article examines the self-reported writing choices of students as they compose different kinds of texts using a wide range of composing technologies, both traditional (i.e., paper, pencils, pens, etc.), and digital (i.e., cell phones, wikis, blogs, etc.). This analysis and discussion is part of the larger Revisualizing Composition study, which examines the writing lives of first-year students across multiple institution types throughout the United States. We focus especially on what appear to be, at first glance, contradictory or confusing results, because these moments of ambiguity in students' use of composing technologies point to shifts or tensions in students' attitudes, beliefs, practices and rhetorical decision-making strategies when writing in the 21st century. The implications of these ambiguous results suggest paths for continued collaborative research and action. They also, we argue, point to a need to foster students' reflexive, critical, and rhetorical writing – across composing technologies – and to develop updated writing pedagogies that account for students' flexible use of these technologies.

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1. Introduction

Notebook paper and pencil, word-processing programs, cell phones, and Facebook: these are just a few of the composing technologies today's students use to write in their everyday, academic, and professional lives. And we know – partly from emerging scholarship (Yancey, 2009; “The Stanford Study,” (n.d.); Lenhart, 2012; Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013; Purcell, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013), and most certainly from our own personal observations of students in the classroom, on campus, and in social places like restaurants and bars – students are writing more than ever with the diverse range of composing technologies and platforms that are widely available to them. Even though we know that students are active writers throughout their daily lives, how exactly students write with this wide range of composing technologies remains unclear: With whom do they choose to write and with which composing technologies? What are they writing when they compose with paper and pencil, a word-processing program, or a cell phone? When and where do they write Facebook status updates? Why do they use their cell phones to write personal or academic notes? How do they decide to write someone an email instead of a Facebook post or a text message? Asking questions, such as these, about students' writing habits and rhetorical decision-making strategies can provide answers that speak to concerns about literacy development, pedagogy, and technology design.

Partly as a way to begin exploring the above questions, and partly as an extension of other high-profile studies of students' writing lives (e.g., Sommers, 2008; “The Stanford Study” (n.d.); and the multiple projects emerging from the Pew Research Internet Project), we conducted the “Revisualizing Composition” study, which examines the writing lives of first-year students across multiple institution types throughout the United States. This article examines the self-reported writing choices of students as they compose different kinds of texts using a wide range of composing technologies, both traditional (i.e., paper, pencils, pens, etc.) and digital (i.e., cell phones, wikis, blogs, etc.). As Shipka (2011) argued, it's important to pay attention to the entire spectrum of composing technologies, since they all are part of students' composing landscape today. As our results demonstrate, students have more flexible understandings of composing technologies than are accounted for in most traditional writing pedagogies.

Reporting on a multi-institutional survey of 1366 students, this article highlights students' flexible use of composing technologies and genre/technology pairings. Although some students use technologies in traditional and expected ways, others blur the boundaries of traditional technology use, reimagining how these technologies can be used in daily writing. We focus especially on what appear to be, at first glance, contradictory or confusing results, because these moments of ambiguity point to shifts or tensions in students' attitudes, beliefs, practices and rhetorical decision-making strategies when writing in the 21st century. The implications of these ambiguous results suggest paths for continued collaborative research and action. They also, we argue, point to a need to foster students' reflexive, critical, and rhetorical writing – across composing technologies – and to develop updated writing pedagogies that account for students' flexible use of these technologies.

2. Literature review

We focused on first-year students' use of writing technologies as a way to echo and extend other multi-institutional studies in international contexts. In addition to both the Harvard Study (Sommers, 2008) and “The Stanford Study” (n.d.), a 2010 multi-institutional study in the United Kingdom (Jones, Ramanau, Cross, & Healing) examined first-year university students' self-reports of the extent to which they had access to and valued the Internet, Web 2.0 tools, and other technologies. These results suggested that most students use e-mail for study purposes, but for much less time than they use other technologies. Not surprisingly, Jones et al.'s (2010) study found that first-year students use digital technologies more extensively for social and leisure purposes than for academic purposes. A similar multi-institutional study conducted in Australia found that while students used “mobile phones, e-mail, MP3 players, chat or instant messaging, and the Internet” in their everyday lives, they made limited reference to Web 2.0 technologies in the study (Waycott, Bennett, Kennedy, Dalgarno, & Gray, 2010, p. 1205), which suggests, again not surprisingly, that social and cultural contexts impact how students use writing technologies.

As part of a larger examination of students' technology use and learning habits, Penny Thompson (2013) reported results of a survey of first-year students at Oklahoma State University; her study blurred technology, genre, and activity distinctions, though, complicating our understanding of the students' nuanced rhetorical decisions about their composing technologies. A series of large-scale Pew Internet Research studies also have examined students' technology

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