



Wayfinding in Global Contexts – Mapping Localized Research Practices with Mobile Devices

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Abstract

Through the use of GPS-enabled mobile devices, writers are increasingly able to incorporate location into their writing and research and to do so from different points around the globe. This article articulates the importance of integrating location into writing research through wayfinding. The objective is to determine how writers locally situate their work in an increasingly globalized world. In so doing, the essay describes mobile tools, such as the Strava application and GPS-mapping, to demonstrate their usability and ubiquity. Further, findings include maps from the study which integrate student research into the global locations where that writing work happens. This form of visualizing research practice clarifies and reinforces student movement as an integral aspect of conducting research in global contexts.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, writers compose with mobile devices at different points around the globe. As mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets become commonplace, the need to integrate these tools into daily writing and research practices increases as well. Moreover, existing mobile networks and interconnected mobile devices are now in the hands of users. Therefore the questions are not a matter of *if* or *when* but *how*: How can composing and research processes in global contexts be represented and made visible? Such questions are central ones to address, for mobility creates new challenges and opportunities for research and teaching about composing practices.

This article presents the results of a six-week long place-based research study conducted on a technical writing study abroad program in Dundee, Scotland. It traces student use of mobile devices to map the physical locations where they worked and researched in Scotland, and maps and the mobile traces generated during student travel and composing are the focus of this study. The work reveals how mobile technology use by students *and* the need for location-based research become important loci of literacy practice as writers enter into the unfamiliar territory of increasingly global, intercultural writing situations.

Although the case examined here follows a group of students in the unique context of a study abroad course, the act of integrating into a local community and understanding its culture is a key aspect of the work all writers do. Further, the need to disseminate research findings to others necessitates a way to walk readers through the research process via

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the use of wayfinding as a framework for discussing these issues. By examining these topics through this particular case, this study articulates many issues of location that will affect online writing work in global contexts now and in the future.

2. The mobile context of composition

Mobiles, a term including both cell phones and smartphones, are increasingly becoming the tool of choice for getting online around the world (Rainie & Poushter, 2014), and we need a similarly mobile-first concept to better understand the importance of location and context in writing. Mobile writing technologies change the nature of connections as well as inflect how we interact. Madanmohan Rao, for example, refers to mobile users as “untethered knowledge workers” (Rao, 2013, p. 1). This sense of writers and researchers moving where their work takes them without sacrificing productivity appeals to businesses and educators alike. From an educational perspective, the use of mobiles as composing devices/technologies takes students beyond simply writing for a global audience. Rather, these technologies provide students with not just a mobile device for composing, but also a similarly mobile, untethered audience reading and writing online in many locations. Within all of these contexts, mobile communication and the composition practices they support include not just voice communication, but a mixture of various composing modes including voice, text, sound, and image. Central to understanding this concept of mobile is the interlinked concept of networks. And such networks, in turn, can be effectively examined via wayfinding.

2.1. Wayfinding and ideas of location and mobility

Following recent discussions of mobile research methods such as Jason Swarts (2007), Olin Bjork and John Pedro Schwartz (2009), Amy C. Kimme Hea (2009), and Yi-Fan Chen (2013) this essay presents wayfinding as a research methodology for studying the impact of location on digital composing practices. Adapted from urban planning and design, wayfinding focuses on the movement of users in physical spaces and their goals in understanding and using those spaces. Focus on movement, action, and understanding provides a useful framework for discussing similar needs of writers as they are tasked with collecting data and researching in non-classroom settings. Just as writers need to find their way through research, successful global communication requires orienting their readers to the unique environment in which that writing took place. With location tracking for digital tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites, it is now increasingly easy to include geographic location as one data point among others when composing via mobile technologies. As teachers of rhetoric and writing begin recognizing the rhetorical nature of place and how it impacts online interaction, in particular, such concepts become pedagogically important. Within this context, wayfinding includes orientation in physical spaces using visual signage or spatial markers.

Urban planner Kevin Lynch coined the term, “way-finding,” in *The Image of the City* (1960) as describing ways people are supported by maps, signs, and other users in making their way about a location. The term has since been adopted by architects, designers, and visual communicators. In rhetoric and writing, wayfinding research contextualizes the writer in diverse workspaces, adding literal place as a part of contextual awareness. As an active participant in these spaces, the writer is tasked with finding his/her way through the space, and here, always in pursuit of a research agenda. As writing research moves out of the classroom and into diverse, global environments, making sense of unfamiliar places becomes an increasingly important part of research practice. As such, the researcher is situated not only among members of a new culture, but in an entirely different environment and way of doing things: of traversing those spaces. By combining wayfinding with GPS-enabled mapping tools, researchers have new means for incorporating the place where research work happens as an integral aspect of that work.

Like similar work on technology impacting boundaries (e.g., Schmidt, 2011; Geisler et al., 2001; Prior & Shipka, 2003; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2014), examination of technologies of place reveal impactful integrations and applications of these technologies, especially ways those technologies can focus research. Mapping reveals links to global contexts by positioning mobile and live-mapping technology as a way for researchers to collect notes, artifacts, and other materials as they move between work sites, enabling the researcher to effectively respond to different cultural contexts. With all the movement associated with these research practices, the mobile technology itself helps provide a stable point for the user to focus on while writing in these different contexts.

Wayfinding literature, in turn, has concentrated on mental maps and sense of space that people create as they move through places. Our mobile technologies literalize these emplacements, thereby enabling students to see relationships

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