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Interactivity and the Invisible: What Counts as Writing in the Age of Web 2.0

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Abstract

This study asks: what counts as writing in a Web 2.0 environment? How do the vocabularies, functionalities, and organizing structures of Web 2.0 environments impact our understanding of what writing is in these spaces and how that writing is performed? Results suggest that we, as scholars and teachers, need to pay more attention to, first, the interactivity that is embedded in and afforded by Web 2.0 applications and, second, the processes that are invisible to the composer. Successful compositional engagement with Web 2.0 applications requires an evolving interactive set of practices similar to those practiced by gamers, comics, and electronic literature authors and readers. What we learn about these practices has the potential to transform the way we understand writing and the teaching of writing within and outside of a Web 2.0 ecosystem.
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1. Introduction

In the fall of 2009, as I was recording data for the study I discuss below, NCTE released Kathleen Blake Yancey's report, *Writing in the 21st Century*. The report was:

> A call to action, a call to research and articulate new composition, a call to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future. (Yancey, 2009, p. 1)

J. Elizabeth Clark (2010) argued that Yancey's call marked a "new era" for our field, "a challenge to articulate how technology is radically transforming our understanding of authors and authority and to create powerful new practices to converge with this new digital world" (p. 27). For Yancey (2009), we have entered a "new era in literacy, a period we might call the Age of Composition" wherein "our impulse to write is now digitized and expanded—or put differently, newly technologized, socialized" (p. 5). Yancey's and Clark's calls echoed Selfe's (1999) culturally and socially situated redefinition of technological literacy (p. 10) and Yancey's (2004) Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair's address during which she observed the field of composition studies has reached a liminal moment: "Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change. Even inside of school, never before have writing and composing generated such diversity in definition. What do our references to writing mean?" (p. 298). Indeed. To invoke

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Dorothy A. Winsor (1992), in the early decades of the twenty-first century—in the age of Web 2.0—what counts as writing?

In 2007, I started asking my students to think about how Web 2.0 applications facilitate the exchange of information across multiple websites. I soon began witnessing the challenges they were having with both conceiving of information movement and composing to facilitate it. Since that time, I have suspected that writing in the age of Web 2.0 is significantly more complex than writing was in the age of print and even in the early years of the visual browser. Inspired by Winsor's seminal article, "What Counts as Writing: An Argument from Engineers' Practice" (1992), the study I discuss in the following pages was designed to investigate if writing in a Web 2.0 environment is substantively different from writing in more traditional print-based and computer environments. What, the study asks, counts as writing in a Web 2.0 environment? How do the vocabularies, functionalities, and organizing structures of Web 2.0 environments impact our understanding of what writing is in these spaces and how that writing is performed?

Winsor was chosen to frame the study for three reasons. First, I saw the investigation as similar to Winsor's; where she was thinking about how people were writing in disciplines other than English studies, I was investigating how writing is happening in a new environment. Second, Winsor challenged three myths we suspected we might have to confront, as well, namely "that when we *really* write something, we think it up all on our own and do creative, original, individual work" (1992, p. 338); "that writing requires the direct presence of human beings" (1992, p. 340); and "that writing necessarily involves words" (1992, p. 342). Third, Winsor's whole discussion suggested that writing is essentially meaning making. That is, regardless of the form, genre, or method of writing, the primary goal of the act of writing is to create meaning for a particular audience in a particular context.

Results from my study confirmed that the Web 2.0 spaces many in our field have been asking our students to compose in (blogs, wikis, Twitter, and so on) are, indeed, spaces for writing that, like more traditional print-based writing, have their own grammars, styles, and linguistics. More importantly, results also suggest that we, as scholars and teachers need to pay more attention to, first, the interactivity that is embedded in and afforded by Web 2.0 applications and, second, the processes that are invisible to the composer. Paying attention to interactivity and what is invisible to the user is something that gamers do (think of using Mario to find hidden coins). Authors and readers of comics (McCloud, 2005) and electronic literature (Hayles, 2008) focus on the interactivity and invisibility embedded in their texts. Study results suggest that we as a field need to start thinking about how one composes in Web 2.0 environments in terms of the relationships between writing and gaming (Colby & Colby, 2008), writing and comics (Mueller, 2012), and writing and electronic literature (Grigar, 2005). Too often the theories and practices associated with Web 2.0, gaming, comics, and electronic literature (elit), are discussed separately in our scholarship and in our classrooms (and, in the case of comics and elit, tangentially, if at all). This can no longer be the case. Web 2.0 is causing these fields and their associated user practices to merge. In the twenty-first century, effective and successful compositional engagement with Web 2.0 applications—Yancey's "new composition"—requires an evolving interactive set of practices similar to those practiced by gamers and comics and elit authors and readers. What we learn about these practices has the potential to transform the way we understand writing and the teaching of writing within and outside of a Web 2.0 ecosystem.

2. Study methodology

This study was designed to catalog the functions and writing spaces within Web 2.0 applications, investigate how those functions and writing spaces were implemented across Web 2.0 applications, and identify function and writing space relationships among Web 2.0 applications.[1] The study included the following phases:

- *Create a master list of English language Web 2.0 applications (September 2008).* The master list was created by cataloging and crosschecking Web 2.0 applications from the following websites: Go2Web20 <http://go2web20.net>, Alexa <http://alexa.com>, and Movers 2.0 <http://movers20.esnips.com/>. Go2Web20 is one of the largest, if not the largest, directory of Web 2.0 applications. Alexa tracks, ranks, and provides robust data on worldwide website usage. Movers 2.0 ranks the top 100 Web 2.0 applications according to their usage by accessing the Alexa API.