



Teaching Writing in the Context of a National Digital Literacy Narrative

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Received 22 September 2011; received in revised form 26 September 2012; accepted 10 April 2014

Abstract

Despite commitments by composition studies and English education to using technology in the writing classroom and to developing teachers' "critical technological literacy" (Selfe, 1999), not much has been written about how graduate programs can help secondary English teachers develop their own critical perspective on digital literacy and on teaching with technology. Recognizing this gap in scholarship, I created a series of assignments (The National Digital Literacy Narrative Project) to engage aspiring secondary English teachers in critical considerations of how public rhetoric about technology and literacy complicates composition studies scholarship and the contexts in which they will teach.

This article analyzes the NDNLN Project and what it teaches writing teachers—and composition studies—about 1) the benefits of analyzing public rhetoric regarding technology and its impact on literacy practices, and 2) the need for graduate programs in composition studies to pay attention to writing teacher education for secondary English teachers. I present the results of the NDNLN Project by sharing the stories of three students whose coursework and comments reflect the ideas, experiences, and changing views of the larger group.

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Keywords: Literacy narrative; Digital media; Teacher education; Writing pedagogy

1. Critical technological literacy, composition studies, and teacher training

In the past twenty years, *Rhetoric Review* has published several articles on graduate education in rhetoric and composition studies, including the 1999 and 2007 surveys of doctoral programs (Brown, Jackson, & Enos, 2000; Brown, Enos, Reamer, & Thompson, 2008), a 2004 survey of master's programs (Brown, Torres, Enos, & Juergensmeyer, 2005), a 2006 report on graduate curricula in the field (Peirce & Enos, 2006), and, most recently, reflections on changing graduate-level curricula (Skeffington, 2010; Carlo & Enos, 2011). Among the findings in these reports are not only the field's continuing commitment to pedagogy and teacher training (Brown et al., 2008), but also greater attention—especially in desired specializations and dissertation research—to technological literacy and to teaching with technology (Carlo & Enos, 2011, p. 216). This increased attention is reflected, further, in *Computer and Composition's* 2009 special issue on "The Future of Graduate Education in Computers and Writing." In their editors' letter, Peter Goggin and Webb Boyd Patricia (2009) argued "It is clear that as new media technologies create new possibilities for

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2014.04.003>
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engagement, our uses of them are challenging traditional perceptions about the role of technology in graduate curricula and the purpose of graduate education as a whole” (p. 1). Contributors to the issue argued for making technology an integral part of graduate programs and teaching and research practices, highlighting innovative methods and program designs moving the field in that direction.

Recognizing an increased interest in writing teacher education at not only the college level, but also at the secondary level, Janet Alsup and Lisa Schade Eckert edited a 2007 special issue of *The Writing Instructor* that noted two distinct trends in the scholarship of both composition studies and English education. Not surprisingly, one trend was attention paid to “the challenges and rewards of using technology in writing instruction.” The second trend was a call for cross-disciplinary and cross-context discussions regarding writing instruction. As Robert Tremmel has indicated in his history of the relationship between English education and composition studies, despite some attempts at unity in the 1970s and 1980s (Gebhardt, 1977; Nemanich, 1974; Comprone, 1974; Hairston, 1974; Larson, 1969), “writing teacher education in first-year composition and English education has since developed along separate—though similar—tracks” (Tremmel, 2002, p. 6). The emphasis in composition studies has been on preparing doctoral students to teach “college composition” (Bazerman, 2002, pp. 32–33), while English education has devoted its attention to teaching literature and writing in high school or middle school, often in the context of requisite standardized tests at the national and state levels.

Because of this separation, students are often unprepared for and confused by college writing expectations, college teachers get frustrated with the “systematic understanding of writing” students begin college with (Fanetti, Bushrow, & DeWeese, 2010), and high school English language arts teachers are frequently not taught a “fully elaborated, coherent, and consistent writing pedagogy” and consequently do not typically view themselves as “professional writing teachers” (Tremmel, 2002, p. 9). In addition, the divide produces what Alsup (2001) has called a “theory-practice-split” (p. 32) between the two disciplines, with the assumption that composition studies needs and develops more theory while English education is more practice focused. As Alsup and Schade Eckert (2007) have noted, however, calls and efforts to bridge the gap between these two fields have surfaced recently from both disciplines, evident in a 2001 special issue of *English Education*, two edited collections published in 2002 (Thomas C. Thompson’s *Teaching Writing in High School and College: Conversations and Collaborations* and Robert Tremmel and William Broz’s *Teaching Writing Teachers of High School English & First-Year Composition*), and the formation of special interest groups within the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Conference on English Education. Like the contributors to the special issue of *The Writing Instructor*, those working to cross the boundaries of the disciplines describe in their publications examples of the benefits (and challenges) of cross-disciplinary work on writing teacher education, and they encourage new and more extensive research. The most recent effort to foster such research is a new journal dedicated to “mentoring teachers at all levels in well-informed practice in the teaching of writing,” *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education* (Brockman & Lindlom, 2012, p. 15).

As a rhetoric and composition scholar who teaches a course on the teaching of writing for master’s students who are primarily current or future high school or middle school English teachers,¹ I have experienced the problematic disconnect between the two disciplines in their discussions of the theory and practice of teaching writing. Preparing to teach this course (English 686: The Teaching of Writing) for the first time, it became clear to me how the scholarship that informed my own research and teaching practices drew almost exclusively from the theories and experiences of college faculty teaching college composition courses. Of particular concern to me as I composed the course syllabus was that even though both disciplines express commitment to using technology in the writing classroom, most of the scholarship discussing teaching writing at the middle and high school levels focuses on *how* and *why* to use technology to teach writing; not much has been written, however, about how rhetoric and composition graduate programs can help secondary English teachers build for *themselves* “an increasingly critical perspective on technological literacy” (Selfe, 1999, pp. 156–157). As Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer (2003) has argued, we can’t improve training for teaching with technology simply by increasing the amount of training on *how* to use technology in the classroom. Instead, she said, teacher training needs to facilitate teachers “developing *their* computer pedagogy and *their* critical technological literacy” (p. 308) which, as Stuart A. Selber (2004) has advocated, can aid them and their students in understanding technology in “critical, contextual, and historical ways” (p. 13). A similar call has been made in *English Education*

¹ New York State public school teachers must get a master’s degree in order to get a Professional Certificate, “the advanced-level certificate for classroom teachers” (NYC Department of Education, 2012).

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