ELSEVIER

About Face: Mapping Our Institutional Presence

Aimée Knight *, Martine Courant Rife, Phill Alexander,
Les Loncharich, Dànielle Nicole DeVoss

Michigan State University, a digirhet project

Abstract

In this article, we situate the web sites of technical and professional writing programs as important institutional spaces that serve as interfaces to particular values, beliefs, and practices. Specifically, we examine the ways in which the web sites of United States-based programs craft identity and anchor these programs. We also analyze the ways in which the digital interfaces we create to represent our work do and *don't* mesh with who we are as a field and what we value theoretically and pedagogically. We borrow from the work of James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeff Grabill, and Libby Miles to articulate what we mean by institutional space, and extend their model of institutional critique into digital space. Further, we offer a three-fold framework for analyzing institutional spaces, related to institutional and technological dynamics, issues of agency and representation, and aesthetic dimensions.
© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Cultural analysis; Disciplinary stance; Interfaces; Institutional critique; Macro-level structures; Micro-level interventions; Program web sites

We hope that institutions can be sensitized to users, to people, systematically from within. . . Though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable. (James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeff Grabill, & Libby Miles, 2000, p. 611).

1. Introduction

Institutional space matters. The geographies—both physical and virtual—we occupy and how we understand those geographies are an important part of our work worlds and lives. We focus in this article on a particular space that serves as an interface between our writing programs and the multiple populations we both represent and serve: program web sites. Program web sites are worthy of our critical attention for a range of interpenetrating reasons, including the fact that they craft and anchor program identities. They serve not only as key places for information dissemination but also as our public digital face. Program web sites also represent our work, along with our professional and institutional identities and affiliations. In many ways, they operate as rhizomatic social and intellectual maps. Program web sites present a sense of what we value theoretically, pedagogically, and technologically; and, importantly, they are part of how we are assessed in terms of our implementation of these values. Program web sites are created and live within institutional and infrastructural hierarchies, and these hierarchies are often invisible to us. One such institutional hierarchical structure

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 517 432 3910; fax: +1 517 355 0159.
  E-mail address: aimee.knight@gmail.com (A. Knight).

relates to the ways in which university sites typically trump college sites; college sites typically trump department sites; department sites typically trump program sites; and program sites typically trump individual faculty members' sites. Perhaps the supreme complexity related to program web sites—a complexity that, we think, partially explains the lack of scholarly attention paid to program web sites—are the incredibly complex and diverse audiences for these sites. Audiences include, but are certainly not limited to, future and current students; parents; high school admissions counselors; a range of university academic advisors; prospective and current faculty; departmental and college staff; departmental, college, and university administration; peer institutions; collaborating and partner institutions; and others who are sometimes invisible and sometimes visible to us.

Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan (1999), in their analysis of representations of women across a range of web sites, focused in part on university web sites, which, they argued, often privilege the dispensing of information as a primary purpose. This approach and these sites often focus less on acts we value (e.g., paying attention to users, representing our work and pedagogical beliefs, crafting and supporting a culture of writing) and more on promoting a particular image of the institution. While Hawisher and Sullivan focused, overall, on representations of women in digital space, including women with academic affiliations, Barclay Barrios (2004) conducted a more specific analysis of how programmatic web sites might be resituated. He called attention to the fact that the potential of program sites is relatively unrealized. Rather than crafting rich virtual interfaces to our scholarly and institutional work, many sites imagine students-as-consumers who visit to browse a course catalog, find an email address, or read course descriptions. This approach turns a potentially robust, rich site into an extended course catalog and phone book.

In a now-landmark piece published in 1994, Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard Selfe interrogated the "borders" built into classrooms, systems—and, specifically, software—and the power differentials constructed and maintained by these borders. They drew upon the notion of contact zones to address "computer interfaces as maps that enact—among other things—the gestures and deeds of colonialism, continuously and with a great deal of success" (Selfe & Selfe, 1994, p. 482). Their piece is not, however, a treatise against software or the particular interfaces that live within software, but rather a call to turn our attention toward the complex articulations and ideological beliefs built into those spaces. Here we would extend their call to attend to the complex articulations and ideological beliefs visible within or under our program web sites. Anne Wysocki and Julia Jasken (2004) performed the deepest interface interrogation since the 1994 Selfe and Selfe piece. Wysocki and Jasken argued that interfaces are rhetorical and reminded us of the importance of understanding interfaces as such. Specifically, they asked us to question the ways in which interfaces encourage us to see and also ask us to forget to see, or to overlook.

With this work as a backdrop for understanding program web sites as complex interfaces, we anchor our understanding of institutions within the institutional critique methodology offered by Porter et al. (2000) in their *College Composition and Communication* article, which was later defended in a special issue of *Works and Days* (Grabill, Porter, Blythe, & Miles, 2003). In the original article, the authors argued that: institutions are rhetorically constructed; institutions are designed by humans; and institutions "contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action" (Porter et al., 2000, p. 613). A methodology and set of associated tools the authors offered for engaging in such revision is institutional critique, which is a local, spatial, empirical, and pragmatic mechanism for change. The authors pointed toward a legacy of institutional *criticism* in our field but encouraged us to move beyond criticism to situated action that involves both a macro-level institutional analysis and micro-level rhetorical techniques. Importantly, Porter et al. (2000) anchored institutional critique to—following postmodern mapping and boundary interrogation practices—spatial analysis, arguing that physical and figurative spaces *do work*; they play into the construction of an institution. Rhetorical and spatial issues are thus inseparably intertwined. Here, we situate program web sites as part of the larger spatial context of institutions (and we mean institutions in their entirety but also programs as institutions-within-larger-institutions).

In a response to Marc Bousquet's (2002) analysis of the 2000 institutional critique piece, Grabill et al. (2003) argued that institutions cannot be seen as monolithic nor should they be taken as always already the same. Rather, each institution is a local manifestation of more general social relations: "institutions are literally physical entities; they are embodied in buildings and other uses of spaces (such as a campus); they function through written policies and procedures, through the decisions of those who enact them, and through the cooperation of those affected by the decisions" (p. 224). These complex institutional dynamics and social relations are what we want to pay situated attention to in this manuscript, as we interrogate the role that program web sites play as interfaces, and as we map how we, as technorhetoricians, can assert agency in the ways in which our sites operate and live as institutional entities.