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Designing Digital Texts in/for the Classroom

Making Students Aware of Curricular Choices By Sarah C. Spring

Curriculum often develops based on the "coolness" factor - what will interest students and what research indicates will engage them in active learning. New Media or Multimodal Composition courses are extremely popular, and English Departments like my own are struggling to modify existing courses to incorporate technology or introduce new courses altogether. After all, these courses have an intrinsically different "archiTEXTure" (the focus of this year's Computers and Writing conference) than many other classes in literature or writing, and this archiTEXTure must often make use of existing scaffolding or framework based on the more traditional, lecture-based English course.

*Movement away from these traditions must take two things into account: 1) questions of rigor and assessment from colleagues/administrators and 2) concerns regarding evaluation and technical ability from students. Multiple methods exist to address these concerns, often simultaneously. Cheryl Ball's Values & Criteria Analysis assignment, for example, asks students to develop an evaluation heuristic for digital texts, which in turn speaks to assessment. But what about the actual process of developing these texts? Much scholarship exists on how these classroom activities and assignments should be designed, but I want to focus instead on questions that resulted from my Writing for New Media class in Fall 2011: what happens when students do not fully grasp the assignment rationale? **if students successfully complete the mechanics of an assignment, how important is their perception of the reasoning behind it?***

Background:

I will briefly provide a research context for these questions before introducing both the course and the students within it. As I indicated above, designing courses with substantial technology components is inherently complex for a number of well-documented reasons - class, race, and access issues being foremost (authors such as Grabill, Wolfe, Monroe, Bloom, to name but very few). Rather than continuing to focus on bridging the digital divide then, I believe that we should re-conceptualize it in terms of context. The issue is no longer limited to computer access or literacy, but is also a matter of students being able to write and use computers in a variety of contexts, such as home, personal,

popular, academic, and writing. Certainly, the skills needed to surf the Internet are markedly different than those required to type a paper or attend class in a computer lab, and once we begin to see the computer classroom as a distinct context, this viewpoint gives us a set of patterns and rules shared by those in that environment.

To better explain my idea of the classroom as context, I will first speak to the scholarship on students in and out of the classroom.

Students and Technology:

What do students say/think about technology? A recent report by PEW (2011) found that Americans increasingly go online for "no reason at all," a finding that complicates our roles as instructors and scholars as we plan activities involving technology - in essence, enforcing structure and purpose where it does not usually exist.



Americans are increasingly going online just for fun and to pass the time, particularly young adults under 30. On any given day, 53% of all the young adults ages 18-29 go online for no particular reason except to have fun or to pass the time. Many of them go online in purposeful ways, as well. But the results of a survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project show that young adults' use of the internet can at times be simply for the diversion it presents. Indeed, 81% of all young adults in this age cohort report they have used the internet for this reason at least occasionally.

 **The internet as a diversion and desti...**

4 months ago

Even the technology students have access to is changing, along with the way students use technology, and the following resources are ones I often show on the first day of class to help introduce the course and its purpose.



shifthappens - home - Wikispaces

This wiki is designed to give you a little more background on the Did You Know?/ Shift Happens (original, version 2.0, one referred to a...

 Wikispaces



DID YOU KNOW 6_PhotoStory.wmv

durangowrangler

3 years ago

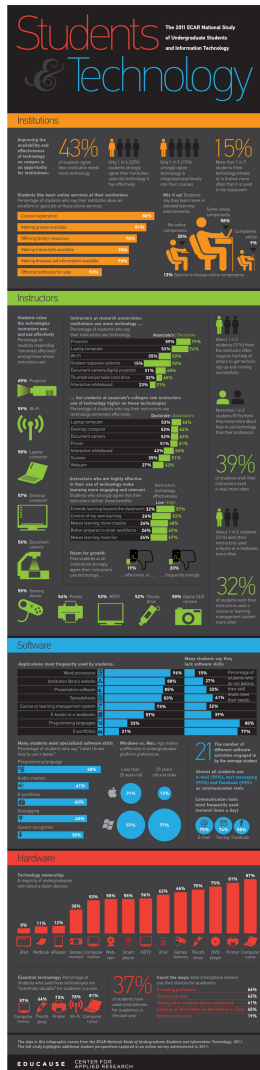


"The Visions of Students Today" 2011 Remix One (trailer)

mwesch

2 years ago

Important to mention here is the recent ECAR National Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology (2011) and its findings that students prefer courses with some online components.

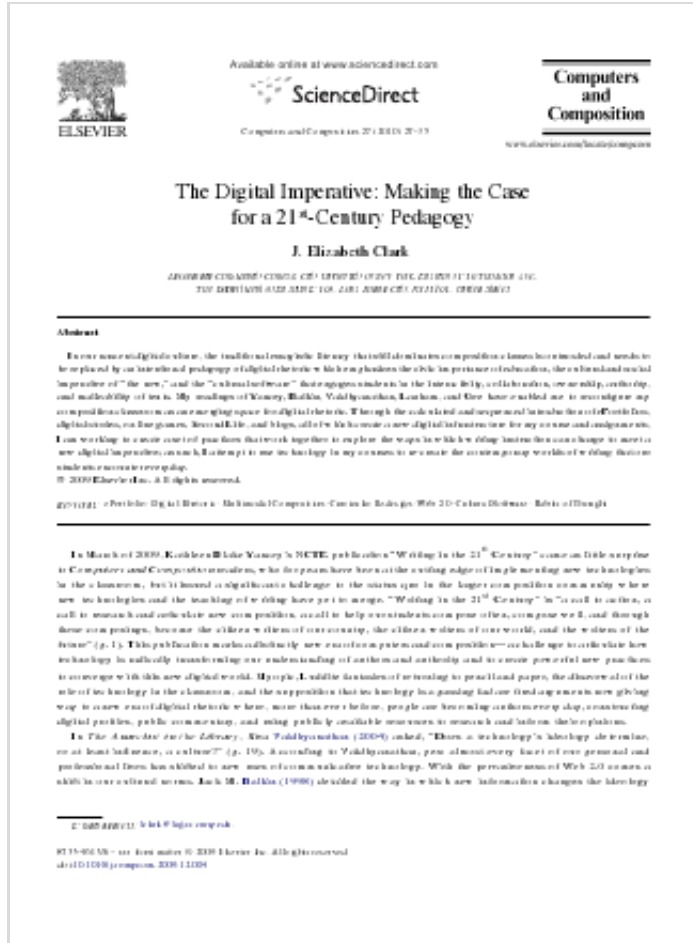


educause.edu

11 months ago

Classrooms and Technology:

All of this information regarding students and technology both aids and complicates the process of designing courses. There are many authors who have addressed student attitudes regarding the construction and assessment of digital texts, and overall, most have come to the same conclusion - that the use of technology allows for/produces better, deeper learning experiences in the composition classroom.



PB Pworks

But there is some disagreement about how this happens, and there are numerous ways to "compose and construct" digital spaces, as the recent Computers and Writing conference attests to. For example, aptitude-treatment interaction research and learning style research argue that student learning preferences affect student satisfaction in online courses (Baer and Baer), but other studies have found no correlation between certain student characteristics and satisfaction (Thurmond, Wambach, Connors, and Frey). Likewise, an article written by Maki and Maki reported that students in an introductory psychology course prefer online feedback, even reportedly learned more than a standard lecture course, but a survey by Marywood University and Laurie McMillan found that their students prefer handwritten comments over typed comments. These results are often in conflict with one another, a conflict which suggests individual case studies are heavily influenced by location, student population, institutional restrictions, etc.

Student Use of Feedback - lauriem



A site of useful writing resources for college teachers and links to some most excellent student projects that are useful for all sorts o...

Google

Due to the format of Storify, I offer only this brief glimpse at some of the existing scholarship to point to the importance of adding to our understanding of students, technology, and issues of learning and satisfaction, an echo of De Pew's call for more research into these topics. Below is a great resource for those looking to discover additional information on hybrid or "blended" learning environments.

[Bibliography « WPA's Guide to the Hybrid Writing Classroom](#)

Everything you need to adopt hybrid courses ... for any WPA who would like more information about hybrid writing courses or administrat...

 wpahybridguide.wordpress.com

archiTEXTure:

The previous studies tell us that students are experiencing, and in some cases perpetuating, multiple dichotomies: personal/academic interactions, familiar/unfamiliar practices, and new/traditional technologies. These dichotomies lead me to several questions as I design my own classroom: how should a classroom be designed? and how should assignments be introduced and structured? My research and teaching experience suggest two potential models for integrating technology into a composition classroom – **context-switching** and **context-meshing**.

In introducing these models, I first want to refer back to two findings from the ECAR study because they shape my approach to the classroom:

"Facebook-generation students juggle personal and academic interactions"

"Students are drawn to hot technologies, but they rely on more traditional devices"

Students are making important distinctions between contexts. For example, Selfe and Hawisher's *Literate Lives in the Information Age* speaks candidly to students not seeing computers as tools of writing: computer lab is "non-English time" with the reverse also being true; similarly, Andrea Lunsford's address to the Computers and Writing conference made reference to her students loving the opportunity to use new technology in the classroom, but not connecting the technology to writing.

[Context Switching - OSDev Wiki](#)

In your average, memory-protected environment, a "context" is a virtual address space, the executable contained in it, its data etc. A "c...

 [Osdev](#)

My coining of the term **context-switching** is taken from such stories, influenced by the scholarship within computer science. Whereas context has traditionally meant environment or the place where writing happens, an area of computer science uses this term in reference to applications and their ability to context-switch, with only one frame or context being active at a time. Bernstein, for example, refers to "context switch" between different programs or applications in his blog post below, and a search of YouTube reveals numerous demo videos on using context switching in software development.

Mark Bernstein: Stian Håklev's Design Proposal

Stian Håklev's Design Proposal Stian Håklev offers an intriguing proposal for a graduate student's knowledge workstation in a screencast ...

→ [Markbernstein](#)

Context Switching In Software Development

[goatlassian](#)

2 years ago

I think likening students to these applications can illuminate the phenomenon of student comfort and familiarity with certain aspects of writing and computers, such as personal writing, but not the more unfamiliar practices of academic composition and new media. Again, many authors have spoken to this "digital disconnect" between how students write in schools and how they write and learn outside of it (see Ellis and his idea of the "part-whole relationship" students have with technology in the classroom), but in the computer classroom, students are forced to confront this disconnect in new, intimate ways.

In the classroom, then, I see the model of context-switching as a series of assignments that slowly take the student from the more familiar (personal writing such as autobiography) to the unfamiliar

The English Department has three tracks within the major: language and literature, writing, and education. All students must complete three credit hours in the "technology" category of our general education program. There are twelve choices in this category; two of them are writing courses, ones that are taught during alternating fall semesters. Indeed, many students take the course for this very reason. By clicking on the link below, readers can find the "Application for Course Inclusion" form, which paints a more complete picture of the learning objectives and outcomes, and my class was designed accordingly.

Touchstone Program - Winthrop University

Application for Course Inclusion in Touchstone Program ... The Touchstone Program is Winthrop University's distinctive foundational...



Department of English at Winthrop - Writing Concentration

The Bachelor of Arts in English with a writing concentration is designed for those students who wish to combine their love of reading w...



I taught "Writing for New Media" last fall for the first time. It is an upper-level course in the department, requiring advanced status and completion of the Touchstone core classes. A colleague had previously taught the course, and I worked from that established syllabus; the first half of the class focused on the theory and history of new media, while the second half transitioned into the practice of writing for new media.

Thirteen students took the course: eleven were seniors/two were juniors, and most were English majors in the language and literature track (one writing track major, one Mass Communications major, and one Psychology major).

WRIT 501: Writing for New Media | Fall 2011, Winthrop University

As I mentioned in class, I am working on a conference paper for Computers & Writing 2012. The call for papers can be found here: archiTEX...



During Winthrop's recent Opening Presidential Address, Dr. DiGiorgio stated that over 70 courses at Winthrop are online and 39 are hybrid; however, because of the nervous emails and student meetings prior to the start of class, I designed the assignment sequence in a way that I initially thought would

gradually introduce English majors to "new media": a series of fairly familiar assignments with unfamiliar or unconventional elements that culminated in a final video project.

First, students created their own WordPress blogs during the first class period, and I told them to think of these blogs as critical thinking or reading journals. Second, there were three shorter writing assignments, each meant to introduce students to new technologies and new mediums. For example, students had previously posted their technology autobiographies, and I asked them to pick one story or thread from this narrative for the "literacy narrative" assignment. Students created a video or audio file of this story and then uploaded it to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a public archive housed within the Ohio State University. Third, the final weeks of the semester were spent working on a 60 second video that expressed a concept or argument from the course content.

DALN Home

The DALN invites people of all ages, races, communities, backgrounds, and interests to contribute stories about how — and in what circu...



The sequence and grade distribution are as follows:

1. Online Writing Activities (30%) - students post multiple times each week
2. Shorter Writing Assignments (30%)

Literacy Narrative, Values & Criteria Analysis, Experiment with NonPrint Presentation, and Peer Review of final projects

3. "Concept in 60" video with accompanying metanarrative (30%) - examples included below

Concept in 60: Evolution of Books



4 months ago

Concept in 60 Final

slavatoredrizzit

10 months ago

Student Responses:

At the end of the semester, after many discussions about content and delivery, I asked students to comment on the course independently from semester evaluations. I had introduced some of the literature included in the Background section, and students were encouraged to critique my choices regarding assignment type and sequence. Through discussion and a link to the CFP for Computers and Writing 2012 on the class blog, they were informed about my intention to present this research at a conference.

PERMISSION TO USE STUDENT WORK

Student Name: _____

Course Name, Number, Semester, and Year: _____

Description of Materials To Be Used (be specific): _____

I would like to keep a copy of the work described above to use in (describe use) _____ . If you are willing to let me use your work, please sign your legal name below and print your permanent address and the date in the spaces provided. Staple this form to a clean copy of your work when you return it to me. Please note that I may not be able to return the work to you.

Please sign your legal name: _____

PRINT your permanent (not school) address: _____

Today's Date: _____

Thank you for your cooperation.

Signature of Faculty Member _____ Date _____

undefined



All thirteen students signed "permission to use student work" forms, but only ten granted permission to use any and all material on their blogs. I have included key comments from a sampling of those ten below; the names of the students are evident in the lower left corner of the text, and clicking on the student's name will take readers directly to that post.

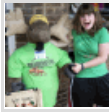
Extra Credit Post | WRIT 501: Writing for New Media

As I mentioned in class, I am working on a conference paper for Computers & Writing 2012. The call for papers can be found here: archiTEX...



First, I draw attention to the students who took advantage of the extra credit opportunity and

specifically addressed my question about effective course planning. Only a few responded, and here are highlights from those posts:



For the ArchiTEXTure idea, I would say I would not only like to learn about different concepts with the context-switching approach, but I would also mostly likely actually learn more this way. With this approach, I can see and understand the need and concepts behind each subject and be able to relate them to one another. This approach reminds me of a study my CRTW class conducted where we (the students) critiqued the way the professor set up the class schedule. It turns out that yes—professors do think about how they set up their schedules! Amazing! Each day we built upon the main subject by adding another idea about reading and thinking critically by studying ways we were most familiar with and then gradually to ones similar to those customs to others further out of our understanding.

 **Crystal Knappenberger**

4 months ago



Simply put, I'm a fan of the context-switching model. I liked that we began the class with something familiar as it lulled me into a sense of stability from the get-go.

 **jmcfadden21**

4 months ago



While both methods, context-switching and context-meshing, have their own merits when it comes to integrating unfamiliar technology with writing which would be considered familiar, I would have to say that in my opinion context-switching seems to be the best way to go. I believe this is because even without adding the technology part of the assignments there is an element of unfamiliar writing. As an English major I

have been trained to write in a very specific way. One thing I have had to get used to in this class is writing in a different way. That in itself was a bit difficult to get use to and on top of that just knowing that I would also be expected to learn to use unfamiliar technology caused me a bit of panic (O.K. more then just a bit!). However, the way are assignments have been set up, primarily the context-switching method, has helped me to not only become comfortable with using the technology, but has also created a sense of enjoyment in working on and completing the assignments.

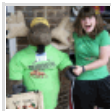
 **Extra Credit – context-switching vs. ...**

4 months ago

My students appear firmly convinced that context-switching is the best way to structure a class. While I had attempted to design my assignment sequence to be a combination of the two methods (context-switching and context-meshing), their commentary reveals a lack of awareness about the multi-context aspects of each assignment. For example, in my opinion, the literacy narrative video is the perfect combination of old and new - a more traditional narrative presented in a nontraditional way; however, no one remarked upon the method of delivery, and after reading through the semester evaluations, a few students even thought this was the least "helpful" or valuable assignment. Instead, as seen in the comments, students praised my efforts in taking them slowly from familiar to unfamiliar, from "English" assignments to new media.

This pattern didn't make sense to me until I compared the comments on course design with the comments about their preferred ways of learning. There is an incredibly interesting parallel between how these three students responded to the extra credit post and how they describe their own learning preferences.

The first three posts below are from the same students I quoted above (in the same order).



Through my many years of learning as much as possible, I have realized there is a specific way that helps me learn the easiest, fastest, most beneficial way achievable. That way is by mixing information I already know with the unknown and seeing how they relate. Understanding one thing to its fullest and then being introduced to a similar yet different concept really aids to my further understanding of both subjects.

 **Crystal Knappenberger**

4 months ago

The above student originally professed that she learned best through the context-switching model, but her comments here suggest a more "mixed" approach or context-meshing, a contradiction I do not believe she is aware of.



With a class like this, which was filled with print-fiends, I think it's imperative to begin with the simpler stuff and then move on into the harder, innovative material. Now of course, not every class will be like ours (we're a unique breed). But I think beginning with assignments that deal with students' self-examinations and allow them to critically think about their own uses of technology instead of overwhelming them with a treasury of techno gadgets is a smart method to adopt. It makes the class less intimidating, the computers a little less daunting and the expectations a little more realistic.

 **jmcfadden21**

4 months ago

Both the student above and below, however, are consistent in their favorable opinion of the context-switching model, although I should mention that the student words below are from the same extra credit post.



However, because I personally (until this class) had never used any of the technology that we have needed to learn to use or even anything similar to it, knowing that I would have to learn to use certain technology quickly in order to complete assignments would have made the class more stressful (And I stress enough as it is), doing so slowly while starting with assignments that I was more comfortable with helped me to relax and gave me the confidence to not only learn how to use the technology but to also have fun with it.

 **Extra Credit – context-switching vs. ...**

4 months ago

The next two posts are from different students, and I include them here because they are

representative of the overall tone in the narratives that accompanied the final video projects; it is a tone that I believe influences how they processed the course information and objectives.



I love the projects that were assigned, even if they are what scare me the most. I have never written a blog before, and even now I have no idea how this one would be received by others. The posts, however, are a great way to apply the knowledge I've learned in class. The best way to learn is to jump in and actually do something. The final project, that video, which will loom over my head until the day I finish it, is everything I am not, at the moment, capable of doing.

 [Uncategorized](#) « [jessicalynnrichardson](#)

4 months ago



Overall, I thought my project was successful in portraying my concept. When I first heard about this project, I was scared. It seemed like a daunting task, and I was contemplating dropping the class but I am glad I did not. The project was time consuming and challenging but I was able to do something I never thought I would be able to do. I had to adjust to a period of discomfort, similar to how people will have to adjust to electronic books, but I was able to overcome that discomfort and find joy in something foreign and new.

 [Concept in 60](#) « [stellask](#)


4 months ago

Final Thoughts:

As these comments indicate, there is fear and discomfort for a student coming into an upper-level writing course that bears little resemblance to the others courses they've taken, even when they are aware that the class is in the Technology skill area. Students know the screen requires different "navigation skills" from those they currently have (as mentioned in the student response from "Allison in Wonderland"), so they gravitate towards the parts of class that are recognizable and familiar even though this reaction overshadows other aspects (see Kirtley and Kitalong et al. for more information about the importance of past experiences).



For example, Christine Rosen, in her article “People of the Screen,” points out that “the screen mediates everything from our most private communications to our enjoyment of writing, drama, and games” and that the screen “is the busiest port of entry for popular culture and requires navigation skills different from those that helped us master print literacy” (20).

 **concept in 60.** « [allison.wonderland](#)

4 months ago

In *Geographies of Writing*, Nedra Reynolds believes this reaction is a result of composition acts being drawn from habitual spatial practices. Students are so familiar with their own habits and tendencies that they may be unaware of the impact these practices have on the way they approach the world. New situations - in this case, a combination of academic writing and computer classroom - cause students to be disoriented, leading them to rely on their practiced habits to regain a feeling of comfort or familiarity.



As Winner writes, “If the long-term consequences of computerization are anything like the ones commonly predicted, they will require a rethinking of many fundamental conditions in social and political life” (596).

 **Concept in 60** « [reservations at dorsia](#)

4 months ago

Ultimately, then, the course was indeed successful in the sense that students navigated the assignments, including the “daunting” final video project. Course evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, and students continually remarked on the usefulness of the course and the need for more courses like it; in fact, their comments indicate students actually did “rethink” several of their opinions (as the student above discusses).

However, I also see a need for further work when I consider that I did not fully engage students in critical reflection of the contact zone where unfamiliar and familiar meet. Perhaps I did not articulate my own thoughts on this topic well enough, and I clearly see that my phrasing of the blog post could lead students to believe these models are hopelessly separated, something I can adjust in future courses.

So, I come back to the original question: how important are student perceptions of the course and its assignments? In this particular instance, I argue that their critical thinking about the topic of new media is more important than their awareness of assignment parameters; it is more essential for

students to face fears and put them into perspective or for students to stretch themselves physically and mentally in a class. Several did make comments about gaining confidence or overcoming discomfort (a worthy goal according to authors like Homicz), and these comments can be interpreted as affirmation of my design choices, particularly in light of poignant remarks like the one below.



we may just have to agree to disagree. But having the conversation may be what's important anyway (Pulp Fiction). Bérubé's lecture made me realize that every question does not always have to have an answer. Prior to his lecture, I had always believed that the goal of school was to find answers. Afterwards, I realized that while I did not find answers to the questions about technology, sparking a conversation about it through my "concept in 60" was something I hope to accomplish.

 Metanarrative « kimberlyfarrier

4 months ago

To echo this student's words, it is an important first step to ask the question. What I did not expect was the insight into student perceptions of their own learning styles and educational preferences and how these two things intertwine, and I am more aware of my own teaching philosophy and areas in need of improvement - which I would not have discovered if I hadn't simply asked for this information. Continued scholarship in this area, even if it is a partial teaching "failure," prompts us to learn from student experience and use this knowledge to build a better classroom. This is a lesson I am already putting into practice as I begin the fall semester, and I conclude with new questions about course design that I will pursue with my students in the coming weeks:

- 1) is there a better point in the semester to introduce questions about course design? The obvious answer is at the beginning, but will students have enough grasp of the material to engage in discussion?
- 2) how can we as teachers encourage students to see these potential parallels between their perceived understanding of the course and their learning preferences, especially within the context of the computer classroom? Can an assignment such as the Values & Criteria Analysis be modified to foster more critical thinking, and what would it potentially look like?
- 3) what role, if any, do past iterations of courses play in this quest for critical awareness? Lanham speaks to the "history" of courses, but will prompting students to see themselves as members of a "society" be successful in breaking through student perceptions?

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