Consider the Audience

Published by

O'Donnell, Tennyson and Jack Dougherty.
Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/52297
Consider the Audience

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“Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies.”
—Sherry Turkle

At one level, web writing is about writing on the web: the flexibility as a multimodal piece, the ability to nimbly circulate, and the capacity to create a network of texts. At another level, the practice is about writing for the web and situating ourselves as readers and writers within its evolving architecture.

The advent of social media platforms necessitates that the web may in fact be many places such as a WordPress blog (an open-source content management site often used for website and blogs), Twitter (a social networking site that allows its users to correspond in 140 character snippets), or Snapchat (an app that sends photos which delete from the recipients' phones after designated time period). One of the biggest challenges and opportunities in digital publication is reaching out across multiple audiences with varied interests and deciphering which platforms are best suited to one’s content.

However, such complexities of context and audience are not new. I first thought about these issues as an undergraduate English major through reading and classes, especially through poetry. Whether a poem be lowered through a window accompanied by gingerbread or delivered to a flickering screen on a subway, the spirit of its invitation often remains the same: to begin a conversation.

My thoughts about web writing and its connection with the liberal arts are shaped by my experience as a recent undergraduate English major at Bryn Mawr College, during which time I created a digital, poetry thesis. After graduating in 2011, my conversations about digital publication and its various manifestations continued with faculty, staff, and students at Bryn
Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges through my work with the Tri-College Digital Humanities Initiative (Tri-Co DH). I hope that my experiences might continue these conversations as part of the exciting and critical pieces in this volume.³

Web writing is about more than writing for the web—including the flexibility of multimodal pieces, the ability to nimbly circulate, and the capacity to create a network of texts. Web writing is also inherently about seeding the development of more opportunities to circulate student work while still foregrounding the difficult navigation of the public/private that accompany them.

A Multimodal Approach to Poetry

What originally attracted me to the English major — or rather who — was Emily Dickinson. I was intrigued by her emphasis on reading “The Way I Read a Letter’s This,” complete with instructions on how I too might partake in her ritual of how to ready a space for reading.⁴ Her role as author was just as carefully crafted; she even designed “envelope-poems.”⁵ It was through investigating Dickinson’s blurred boundaries of agency between the reader and author and her bold approach to form that I began to explore the possibilities of new media publication and its role in the evolving, hybrid relationships between authors and readers.⁶

My thesis capitalized on my interests in poetic form and representations of readers across media by exploring the early poems of Marianne Moore (another poet who performed an intricate balance of public and private through her poetry) from Bryn Mawr’s Special Collections via a website publication. I used hyperlinks to approach new ways of reading Moore’s poems: the use of web design to visualize the ways in which poems opened out beyond a linear structure.

For example, Moore’s poem “To My Cup-bearer” packs in allusions to Classical myths, literary works, and even a Bryn Mawr student secret ceremony. In visualizing these allusions together the weight of the role of the cup-bearer could be felt. By physically overwhelming the screen with hyperlinked windows to each allusion, the reader is both enlightened by the
knowledge described in the poem and also engulfed by the ambition of its scope.7


Before I was able to hack the hyperlink as a vehicle to various multimodal qualities, I had to learn more about the larger information ecosystem. But at the early stages of my web thesis, I didn’t know what a server was or how it functioned, I wasn’t clear on copyright, and I didn’t know how to code.

Too often, the digital fluencies of incoming students are confused with mastery of platforms and software skills. Sophistication with media platforms should not be defined only by the ability to successfully complete a task on an interface (e.g. send a “private” message to another user, upload a video into a public channel, or complete forms on a profile page). Instead, we should define digital acumen by an overall awareness of the digital infrastructure. As an incoming freshman, considered a “millennial,” my knowledge of digital tools was fragmented. I could hack Microsoft Word to
work like a (very limited) version Photoshop, but I didn’t read the terms of service or think about what happened to my data.

Constructing a digital senior thesis provided an opportunity for me to explore questions related to how information functions on the web, how to negotiate issues related to public versus private audiences, and a myriad of other questions related to media translation across platforms. When I began my work on a web-based thesis, the most beneficial experience was not jumping into the backend of WordPress (a skill I still use on a daily basis) but learning what kinds of questions I should ask when considering web writing of any sort.

I surveyed the platforms supported by Bryn Mawr College and talked with Information Technology staff about what it meant to be open-source. I narrowed the scope of the primary materials that I was using in Special Collections both as a way to ground my own work and to limit my materials to those in the public domain. Some of the letters that I originally intended to use were bound up in copyright, and while I learned the process for requesting permission, I knew being granted permission was unlikely to fit within my timetable.

This experience provided me with a set of guidelines that I use with every new media project. These guidelines allow me to critically approach platforms and assess the complexities of audience in ways that begin to build the kinds of interactions I hope for, and thus, position me to become an architect of my new media environment.

1. Is this medium adding a critical lens to the design of my argument?
2. Is this the audience I hope to be part of?
3. What are the terms of service and do I feel comfortable with the kind and amount of information I am sharing? (e.g. metadata and location services)

Negotiating Publicness

In addition to having a better understanding of the infrastructure, the cycle of publication from an author’s perspective also helped me to rethink my
own writing practices. In my previous papers, I viewed citations and footnotes as ways of tracing my thoughts or simply referencing evidence. However, when writing for the web, I began to think of citations as a way of creating a path to discussion. Citations became central to my writing process because they contributed towards a broader dialogue among scholars and texts.

As Kathleen Fitzpatrick describes, web writing is a way of entering the arena. Speaking at the Modern Language Association presidential forum in 2012, Fitzpatrick extended the boundaries of the blog so that it is defined not only as a “kind” of writing but as a location where both dynamic reading and writing occur:

... the blog instead provides an arena in which scholars can work through ideas in an ongoing process of engagement with their peers. That spatial metaphor – the arena – is much to the point here: really grasping how something like a blog might serve scholarly communication requires understanding that a blog is not a form, but a platform – not a shape through which are extruded certain fixed kinds of material, but a stage on which material of many different varieties – different lengths, different time signatures, different modes of mediation – might be performed. 8

Fitzpatrick reminds us that through our writing we engage in performance and that when we choose a platform, we are also setting up a stage with multimodal capacities. When students write for the web, they should be prompted to become critical users who delineate the context, content, and circulation for each platform. Instead of merely advocating for one format or type of work, web writing assignments can provide room in a classroom setting to decide whether to converse on Twitter or Facebook, whether to write using Medium or WordPress, and how students might develop a rubric for platform adoption.

As an example of how the web can be used as a scholarly platform, I recently talked with a professor who was concerned about her privacy, copyrights, and intellectual property. She wanted a web presence but was thinking about deleting her Facebook account. However, when she considered her audience and the benefits of participating in conversations via Facebook, she recognized that some of the most exciting debates in her field are hap-
pening spontaneously on Facebook. While still critical of the trade-offs, she decided kept her Facebook account but committed to being thoughtful about which ideas she posted.

Transparency around scenarios like these are especially crucial for students who might not have begun to think about copyright or the long trail of their digital archive. Natalia Cecire, in her piece, “How Public Like a Blog: On Academic Blogging,” illustrates the tensions of blogging. Cecile says academic blogging is filled with possibility and with potential risk for less established writers:

Thinking in public is a difficult habit to get into, though, because public is the place where we’re supposed to not screw up, and thinking on the fly inevitably involves screwing up. Blogging with any regularity in essence means committing oneself to making one’s intellectual fallibility visible to the world and to the unforgiving memory of the Google cache.  

When students publish online, they assume the responsibilities of authorship. As Cecire notes, online authorship includes an online archival record that exists long after its publication. The consideration of such implications for visibility is crucial for students, especially those who might not have picked a career path.

One way we hope to raise awareness of such issues as part of the Tri-Co DH initiative is to ask our summer interns and researchers to report their work through blogging. Before publishing each blog, we ask to meet with students for a pre-publication discussion during which we draw out the possible stakeholders and readers: Think about how someone from your internship might read this? How might that differ from your professor? Will you be sending this to family and friends? A potential employer? A scholar whose work you cite? The goal of such questions is to reflect upon layered interests and stakeholders and to give students the opportunity to respond to such possibilities if they have not already.

Hema Surendranathan, a recent Tri-Co DH intern, points to the challenges of such performance in her blog, “How to be Cool or Thinking about Audience.” Her post narrates her internship experience of being charged with
sending emails to publicize the site’s newly-published fiction. Knowing that there would be a deluge of emails that came before and after hers, she realized that she had to develop her pitch in the email subject line—and that to prompt a reader to read that it had to be “cool.” Surendranathan further reflects in her blog post, “who could be interested?” and “how can I get them to listen?”

Audience is perhaps the most difficult negotiation of web writing, especially as we manage the circulation through various social platforms and code-switch for several interested parties. Audience is also the most exciting.

When students were surveyed about why they chose to work in the digital humanities at Re:Humanities, a Tri-College undergraduate symposium on digital media, they unanimously responded that they want their work to circulate beyond the classroom. Stephanie Cawley, a recent Re:Humanities presenter, highlights the heightened sense of scholarly responsibility when writing online. As she explained in this short video about the symposium, “When you’re producing something that’s going to be online... you have a greater responsibility to engage more deeply, to understand everything you need to understand, because you have a greater responsibility to educate and reach out to a larger audience.” When students feel an increased level of investment in their projects and a heightened sense of responsibility to an actual audience, the work becomes less about grades and more about shaping their scholarship.

One way to increase opportunities for students to engage in public scholarship is to invite serious discussions in the classroom about social media platforms. Engineering opportunities for low-stakes media adoption that allows students to reflect thoughtfully and openly about their impact can invite a fruitful mingling between vernaculars of the scholarly and the social.

Take for example, Robinson Meyer, who Alex Madrigal profiles in his article, “How to Actually Get a Job on Twitter.” Madrigal emphasizes that it was not Meyer’s “Klout score” which earned him the position of associate editor at The Atlantic as a freshly graduated Northwestern college student. Rather, it was his ability to synthesize information, read quickly and deeply, and also to engage in discussions with candor and humility.
These are the same skills that students learn in seminar style courses offered by liberal arts colleges: reading across disciplines, developing expertise, and delving into discussions. Students learn to challenge each other, and more importantly, themselves. But first, students have to be able to recognize that they are on stage and then they have to allow themselves to write for it.

I experienced this opportunity to write for a more public stage as a member of Katherine Rowe’s “Global Shakespeares” course. We began the course by explicitly laying out a social media policy and our expectations for each other as a class. We discussed the benefits of adding Twitter to the classroom, but also its limitations. After a robust discussion of what Twitter is and why we might use it, we decided to revisit the possibility of incorporating Twitter later in the semester.

Midway through the course, during two students’ presentation on audience interaction, they asked their classmates to “paper-tweet” during a 20-second movie clip. After a quick introduction to the “rules of Twitter,” notecards for tweets were passed out and the clip was played. Paper tweets were written and read aloud. What ensued was a variety of tweets: some the epitome of Shakespearean wit, others condensed, elegant meta-commentaries, and still others inside jokes that referenced class conversations.

Two main considerations arose from this experiment. The first concerned the length of audience participation. For the first time, everyone in class talked, and for the same length of time. We began to consider the economy of a medium that allowed for a variety of voices and how such a constraint could helpfully influence engagement. The flow of replying and attributing became conscious, and the act of thinking aloud stimulated the collaborative shaping of an idea. The second consideration emerged from the creative tenor of the tweets: why do we sometimes feel uncomfortable talking in the classroom in ways that engage wit and humor?

In the following class, the next pair of student presenters decided to run the paper-tweet experiment again. This time participants were asked to switch cards with a partner so that no one read their original post. The additional layer created authorial distance that mimicked the sometimes-removed self of online interaction. Our post paper-tweet reflections grappled with the
questions of authorship and persona, topics that drew on theoretical texts we had read in class.

Following these paper tweets, we revised the class policy to allow tweeting in class for those who were interested. We confirmed the spaces and moments in which recorded interactions hindered rather than advanced our conversation and created cues for tweeting so that it was still possible to think through ideas that were unrecorded. The original concern of students who wanted to maintain the classroom as a place of thought experiment was upheld but others began to forge out into the Twitterstream with developed twitter voices. Ultimately, we were able to recognize the costs and benefits of Twitter as a platform in a low-stakes environment as well as within a thoughtful scholarly community.

Looking Forward

There will never be a perfect schema for writing for the web. Interfaces are reconfigured regularly. Platforms wax and wane. From one day to the next, the conventions of how we interact online from reading and writing to connecting with friends, family, and employers rapidly shifts. Fortunately, liberal arts students who graduate with an understanding of historicized technological shifts and who are encouraged to recognize their experiences as part of a larger and longer framework of media change, are well-positioned to push the boundaries of their own scholarship and to become sophisticated readers and writers of the web.

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How to cite:

See an earlier version of this essay with open peer review comments.14

Notes


13. Katherine Rowe, 'Global Shakespeares' class, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA, Fall 2012.