

REVIEW: Postcritical Perspectives on Literacy Technologies

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Teaching Writing with Computers: An Introduction. Ed. Pamela Takayoshi and Brian A. Huot. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. 257 pp.

Silicon Literacies: Communication, Innovation and Education in the Electronic Age. Ed. Ilana Snyder. New York: Routledge, 2002. 190 pp.

When it comes to computer technologies, English studies finds itself in a postcritical age. By this I mean that computers as literacy environments have become an undeniable part of the academic landscape, leaving very few activities unaffected. In the 1980s, some in the profession, especially scholars in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, studied with vigor and fascination the emergent nature of online literacy practices and their implications for the processes, dynamics, and politics involved in writing, reading, research, collaboration, communication, and more. One assumption was that computers could be avoided if their disadvantages outweighed their advantages: After all, we could always fall back on the more tried-and-true—and the more intellectually comfortable—technologies of print. Although books remain important to the profession, computers can no longer be understood as optional or alternative literacy environments. As is obvious to anyone who has stepped onto a college campus recently, computers have insinuated themselves into academic work at all levels, in particular literacy work, no matter the view of any person or program. And the stakes could

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not be higher. For at issue is the future shape of literacy instruction and its significance to students.

Adopting a postcritical stance does not entail becoming an uncritical participant in computer initiatives. Nor does it require embracing theoretical positions that attribute to computers an impressive array of essential causal powers that they simply do not have. Rather, this stance acknowledges the growing presence of all things digital, assumes that such things have implications for English studies, and encourages applications that align with—and productively challenge—the values of the profession. Moreover, a postcritical stance does not minimize the effects of various forces on the design and use of computer technologies, recognizing that they are social in every respect. On the design side, disciplinary perspectives, political values, market conditions, legal precedents, software conventions, and aesthetics are all examples of forces that contribute to the instantiation of a technological artifact. Its operation, however, is not preordained by design cultures. On the use side, other types of forces influence computer-based activities. These include pedagogical approaches, curricular programs, institutional policies, reward systems, and academic-corporate alliances. A postcritical stance does not reject the notion that computers can encourage certain kinds of uses and perspectives, which are often antithetical to the belief systems in the humanities. At the same time, it finds promise in projects that are sensitive to the networks of social affiliations that constitute computer technologies. The books reviewed here help to illuminate those networks.

All of the authors contextualize computers in one fashion or another. The contributors to the collection by Pamela Takayoshi and Brian Huot tackle the myriad issues associated with writing as it moves into online environments. Although the issues inevitably involve institutional structures, the contributors very much focus on the composition classroom, including advanced classrooms that teach technical communication. The contributors to the collection by Ilana Snyder cast a wider net, focusing not only on different sorts of instructional spaces but also on broader relationships that connect education to work and culture. Individually and in combination, the authors speak to English studies in ways that foreground the bigger social picture, which is often absent in both popular and institutional representations of computers.

With an emphasis on pedagogy, new media, and assessment, the volume by Takayoshi and Huot focuses on the integration of computers into writing courses. Such a focus has occupied the profession for decades, yet it remains significant because of the constantly shifting sociotechnological contexts of higher education. The sixteen chapters are framed by an introduction that lays out certain pedagogical arguments for readers, who for the most part are assumed to be new to teaching writing with computers. Two of these arguments can be readily found in the published literature. The first is that technological initiatives should be driven by sound

pedagogical objectives developed offline. This is good advice for English teachers who have just begun to incorporate computers into their courses, largely because it values disciplinary knowledge over technical knowledge. Still, this one-way literacy approach has its shortcomings, the main one being that it is nondialogic: Not only does the approach assume that computers are neutral, but it does not acknowledge the postcritical reality that computers can encourage teachers to reconsider their taken-for-granted theories and practices. A more useful if complex approach would make clear the ways in which literacy and technology impinge on each other.

The second argument, which derives from the humanist critical tradition rather than instructional philosophy, is that students should be educated as critics of, and not just users of, computers. As Takayoshi and Huot contend, “The field has channeled an optimism about technology into a critical, accepting stance which now argues that since technologies are an increasingly necessary component of the writer’s repertoire, savvy, informed computer and composition teachers and students must be technology *critics* as well as technology *users*” (4). This is also good advice, but I would enlarge it to account for a third subject position: students as *producers* of computer-based artifacts that involve English studies (e.g., hypertext fictions, research-oriented Web sites). Numerous scholars have justly criticized instrumental perspectives that concentrate on the functions of software programs. Such perspectives often give students the impression that learning how to use and think about computers productively is simply a matter of understanding, in operational terms, how computers work. Instrumentalism, or at least certain reductive versions of it, has been complicated by those who see computers not as value-neutral tools but as cultural artifacts that are directly and inexorably implicated in a wide range of social contexts as well as entangled in value systems. One result of this complication has been that teachers have attached a great deal of importance to the development of student-critics, a move that makes sense in the humanities. However, all too often humanistic approaches remain overly detached from the postcritical realities of a digital age, preparing students to scrutinize popular representations of computers, for example, but not to participate in the material practices that fashion technological systems. Although the critics-users binary clarifies a valuable role for English studies, it does not call to mind the complete range of subject positions that students should be encouraged to explore. My view is that teachers should emphasize three subject positions, helping students become adept at mobilizing them at various times and in various combinations: students as users, critics, and producers of computer technologies. The additional subject position not only accounts for digital production activities but also mediates the binary division between instrumental and critical literacies (Web design, for example, demands both effective computer use and informed critique).

Takayoshi and Huot arrange the chapters into five thematic sections, but for my purposes I scaffold the chapters in order to gradually disclose the complexities involved in teaching writing with computers. In other words, I propose an organization that can structure an articulated educational program for teachers new to technological environments. I would first ask such teachers to read the essays by Janet Carey Eldred and Lisa Toner, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Carolyn Handa, Sibylle Gruber, and Chris M. Anson. These essays provide a judicious introduction to the issues, accommodating conventional disciplinary practices while occasionally considering the ways in which computers might challenge those practices in fruitful ways. Eldred and Toner formulate responses to a question that is important to those who do not have easy access to technology: "What can be done with computers in traditional, print-focused writing classrooms?" (36). The responses are cogent because Eldred and Toner map them onto the familiar phases of the composing process and onto what we already know about managing effective and ethical instructional spaces. Yancey concentrates on one-to-one and one-to-many e-mail exchanges. A postcritical reality of e-mail is that it has become a primary site for written interaction. Students obviously write and read an enormous number of online texts, but Yancey supplies a discussion that should help teachers systematically incorporate e-mail into writing courses. She summarizes the different types of forums available and their pedagogical applications, and presents a planning heuristic that is congruent with the social theories that inform current composition pedagogy. Teachers would be wise to use this heuristic before getting too ambitious with e-mail.

The chapters by Handa and Gruber should be read in tandem. Handa imagines uses for the Web that promise to enrich student experiences, while Gruber demonstrates a series of exercises in which students are shown how to transfer important analytical skills to the Web. Teachers will welcome the essay by Chris M. Anson, who offers a postcritical perspective on employing computers in assessment contexts. Anson alerts teachers to the interpretive limitations of computers, arguing that they will never be able to replace people as responders capable of understanding the rhetorical dimensions of texts. But he does not dismiss computers either. In fact, his chapter makes obvious that "innovations in both hardware and software are giving us the means to vary the nature and medium of our feedback to students and the feedback they provide to each other" (237). Because Anson is interested in exploiting the text-handling capabilities that can support and augment assessment activities, he reviews such possibilities as providing embedded commentary, conducting electronic conferences, making draft comparisons, and providing annotated models that elucidate evaluation criteria. Each of these possibilities presents potential problems, but Anson is right to remind us that more research is needed in this area. His argument is postcritical in that it encourages teachers to distinguish the things that computers are genuinely good at.

My second grouping of essays challenges more than accommodates conventional disciplinary practices. Dickie Selfe characterizes the (still) experimental nature of technology-rich pedagogies, advising teachers to develop locally sustainable approaches that leverage expertise and provide adequate support structures. His most unusual recommendation is to involve students deeply in all facets of instruction, from designing computer classrooms to evaluating assignments. Selfe implies a postcritical point that should not be minimized: In technological contexts, one can find an inverse relationship between age and expertise. Stuart Blythe discusses computer-mediated communication “as a hybrid that sits somewhere between talking and writing” (119). More important, perhaps, he confronts two myths that have compromised educational progress, one being that online exchanges are more egalitarian because they mask customary markers of status, the other being that traditional classrooms (as opposed to computer classrooms) are nontechnological spaces. Confronting technology myths is crucial to avoiding deterministic stances and naïve revolutionary rhetorics. The chapters by Scott Lloyd DeWitt and Marcia Dickson and by Nicholas Mauriello and Gian S. Pagnucci recount paradigmatic stories about the hard transition into teaching writing with computers. These teachers share their struggles with the aspects of online environments that can place into question established assumptions and practices. Such richly textured reflections contribute to our collective sense of what we might gain and lose in a digital age.

The stories of students are also valuable because they offer insight into their perspectives on computers, which are surprisingly complex. Karla Kitalong, Tracy Bridgeford, Michael Moore, and Dickie Selfe describe variations on an autobiography assignment whose goal is to “help students recognize that their experiences with technology are not merely insignificant threads in a larger fabric of social narrative about technology, but that they can, through their own ways of telling, influence the stories told about technology in Western technoculture” (220). What is useful is that this assignment moves from the domain of practical experience into psychological and social realms, acknowledging the frequently overlooked discursive forces that have a bearing on the creation and use of technological systems. If Anson discusses ways to exploit computers for feedback purposes, Charles Moran and Anne Herrington consider evaluation criteria for academic hypertexts that do not always apply to traditional essays. Teachers would profit from duplicating their collaborative exercise of evaluating student hypertexts alongside conventional, nonhypertext student compositions. For Moran and Herrington, this exercise “has made visible what was transparent, and has made us reflect on what we conventionally do” (256). In postcritical fashion, it also puts teachers into critical conversation with the material practices of making online texts.

My final grouping of essays scaffolds in some of the most challenging issues for teachers, which relate to the visual, race, and gender. In the evolution of computer

interfaces—from command-line to menu-driven to graphical—it is not hard to notice a growing reliance on the visual, both in the interfaces themselves and in the texts created through interfaces. English teachers trained to work with words often find it difficult, on both functional and conceptual levels, to integrate verbal and visual information, especially in new media contexts that multiply the presentation options. Anne Frances Wysocki and Mary Hocks address this problem in different ways. Wysocki argues that, consciously or not, our visual approaches are always “very much tied up with attitudes we have about what the proper relations should be among thinking, texts, our bodies, and each other” (187). Her contention, then, which to me seems irrefutable, is that productive engagements with the visual require paying attention to larger questions of ideology (an enterprise, incidentally, that English teachers are indeed prepared to carry out). Hocks favors the phrase *visual rhetoric* over *visual literacy*, asserting that the latter is “really inadequate for describing the kind of active, multimodal learning that we want to encourage in our students” (215). One key aspect of this learning is becoming skilled at structuring interactive online texts. Although much hypertext theory assumes incorrectly that fixed texts always address a monadic, static, unified reader, new media contexts do in fact introduce unique interactive capabilities. Hocks shows teachers how to address such capabilities through critique and design assignments. In terms of race and gender, complex social issues become even more so online, despite what computer industry marketing hype would lead us to believe. Samantha Blackmon offers a pedagogy of inclusion that challenges the popular claim that cyberspace is a raceless space; Christine Tulley and Kristine Blair put forward an approach that works toward gender equity in technology education; and Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe provide a feminist intervention that suggests ways to overcome the barriers for women faculty in distance education. These authors recognize an important truth about technological projects: their contexts and default settings have tended to ignore nondominant perspectives. This has not come as a surprise to many humanists.

The volume by Ilana Snyder is broader in scope, expanding the social connections to what she calls “silicon” literacy practices, which, in short, “represent the ways in which meanings are made” online (3). Although both books contextualize computers, her introduction emphasizes the worlds of work and politics, because these are more significant to academic computing than teachers often think. Academic computing is not an island unto itself. Its directions are inevitably influenced by larger cultural conditions like globalization and privatization. Such conditions might appear to be the concern of university administrators; however, there are real interdependencies at the pedagogical level. For example, I created a distance course that was steered heavily by circumstances extrinsic to the English department. Not only did a conservative university position on intellectual property influence content development, but the instructional designer I worked with provided standard-

ized templates that were difficult to resist because they leveraged a mature network of commercial resources. This situation was created by an intricate interplay of sociotechnological forces from within and without academia. Contributors to this volume are alert to such expansive causal structures and their postcritical dimensions.

Snyder's volume is also broader in that it includes people from beyond computers and composition. The contributors, who come from English, education, and media, film and cultural studies, are emblematic of the interdisciplinary perspectives required by a digital age. As a case in point, consider speed as a feature of computer-mediated communication. Readers in electronic environments expect them to be responsive, so writers must orchestrate the temporal dimensions of online texts. But this involves competencies that transcend the familiar confines of the English curriculum. For example, students need a certain level of technical knowledge in order to produce Web sites that are optimized for performance. However, a fast text is not necessarily an effective text, so whenever possible speed must be calculated in rhetorical terms, even though a rhetoric of optimization has yet to be worked out for a highly visual medium where images consume the bulk of the bandwidth. This type of (standard) activity combines technical, rhetorical, and visual disciplines in ways not before imaginable.

Snyder organizes the eleven chapters into two sections: one on literacy and rhetorical issues, the other on pedagogy and innovation. Despite that arrangement, which is useful, I would invite people to read first the essays that conceptualize the nature of silicon literacy practices. Readers can then turn to specific contexts and cases. As opposed to focusing on what we might do with new technologies, Chris Bigum responds to a larger question: "What kinds of relationships do we want to have with the world beyond our boundaries?" (136). His exploration of the linkages between schools and communities reminds teachers that the Internet connects not only computers but also cultures with expectations about educational work, expectations that play no small part in the success or failure of online projects that extend beyond classroom walls. The chapter by Douglas M. Kellner is an ambitious take on a thorny subject: keeping education relevant in a time of dramatic sociotechnological change. He contributes an important critical agenda that stresses the fact that computers often exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing social inequities. Kellner shifts into postcritical mode, however, by articulating an array of media-hybrid literacies meant to empower people from subaltern groups. Likewise, Ron Burnett attends to the visual from a social perspective, confronting rather than eliding the differences between images and texts. As might be expected, these differences are as much a function of culture and tradition as of technology.

In two of the more interesting pieces, Nicholas C. Burbules and Michael Joyce further our understanding of hypertext writing and reading. The Web of course is a

contested terrain, one that both accommodates and resists—sometimes at once—conventional textual practices. But its potential in either direction is affected by our grasp of linking structures, which tend to be undertheorized. Burbules reveals the subtle complexity of the link, showing that it has both semantic and navigational qualities, a dual character. He then offers design frameworks based on this character for making the Web meaningful in social terms. Michael Joyce calls for a post-hypertextual rhetoric that resuscitates the protocols of reading links tend to spotlight. He has a serious disagreement with critics who believe that electronic environments destroy literacy and promote superficial engagements. His essay makes clear that on both physical and metaphorical levels we have always been surfers of discourse, skipping around texts, making random and associative connections. This deceptively simple point should help to dispel unfair stereotypes that characterize students today as unusually impatient readers incapable of sustained inquiry.

Of the chapters that discuss specific contexts and cases, the relevant ones for postsecondary educators are by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, George P. Landow, J. Yellowlees Douglas, and Mark Warschauer. Knobel and Lankshear report on a study of the community ratings system on eBay.com, the popular auction site. After identifying and illustrating the discursive moves and ethical values that have emerged between buyers and sellers, these researchers conclude that “[r]atings have actually become a ‘currency’ for the eBay community, assuming the kind of role local community networks and character references have in physical space” (21). Because ratings systems also have currency in academia, I would urge Knobel and Lankshear to study next student communities at sites like ratemyprofessors.com. Although quite different from eBay, such communities might increase our awareness of student interactions and expectations. Community action (or inaction) is also at the heart of the chapter by Landow, who tells an instructive narrative about the relationship between innovation and support in technological settings. In nicely detailed fashion, he substantiates a claim that has been made periodically in the published literature: sustained institutional support at the highest levels is crucial to the success of innovative work with computers. The postcritical dimension of the narrative is its continuous attention to social, political, historical, and economic contexts.

Like Landow, Douglas is well aware of institutional forces, which shaped her experience teaching in a new distance program. But more provocative is this conjecture: “[O]nline environments may actually be the *best* means for teaching writing and may also provide valuable opportunities for faculty to model strategies and practices” (118). Douglas is optimistic because under certain circumstances and in certain contexts computers have in fact contributed in unique and impressive ways to educational endeavors. The design of her distance course, for example, encouraged many more written interactions in which students helped each other negotiate zones

of proximal development. Finally, Warschauer examines how language use constructs identity online. More specifically, he looks at the micropolitical discursive activities of computer users in Hawaii, Egypt, and Singapore, tracing the tensions that exist between leveraging global networks and valuing local identities. Warschauer wants us to see these inevitable tensions as productive; his objective is to help students become astute users who can exploit the contradictions in networks for both personal and professional purposes. In sum, all of the chapters that discuss specific contexts and cases do so from a postcritical viewpoint, looking to harness the power of computers in ways that make sense for the profession.

To conclude, I would simply say that if students are to become agents of positive change, they will need an education that is comprehensive and truly relevant to a digital age in which much of the instructional agenda seems to be little more than indoctrination into the value systems of the dominant computer culture. These two books point in the right direction, one that should be comfortable and fruitful for humanities scholars and teachers.