Editorial
Reading, Writing, and Digital Composition: Reintegrating Constituent Literacies in Online Settings

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Communication design specialists have many challenges in the twenty-first century global, online world. Geographically distributed teams must work together efficiently and effectively. People may need to interact across cultures and languages or using a common language like English or Spanish. In order to complete coherent design projects, they often need to negotiate varied communications software. Most important, both to communicate within teams and to clients with widely varied communication skills of their own, engineers and other communication design professionals must be able to engage the basic literacies of reading, writing, and digital (i.e., multiple media like images, audio, or video)—often called *multimodal*—composition as a holistic skill set, and they must be able to use them well in online environments. These literacies comprise communication skills learned in school and honed in business settings; they are required for clear communicating whether through alphabetic texts or multimodal compositions.

RE-THINKING LITERACY

In many venues, scholars write about online writing instruction (OWI) and communication design. They are, in effect, writing about how writing is a core literacy, or knowledge and skill that is necessary to master in online settings. Although not as often discussed, the ability to read well in these same settings and to develop multimodal compositions using such media as text,

images, and video in online settings also are core knowledge areas and skills. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among these three core literacies in a Venn diagram, where the overlapping circles represent the *new, integrated online literacy of contemporary communication design*. I argue that communication designers need to understand these three distinct literacies holistically, where the parts are equally inherent to their work. Of course, readers of this journal already use these three literacies in technical communications work, but perhaps not as deliberately or self-consciously as possible.
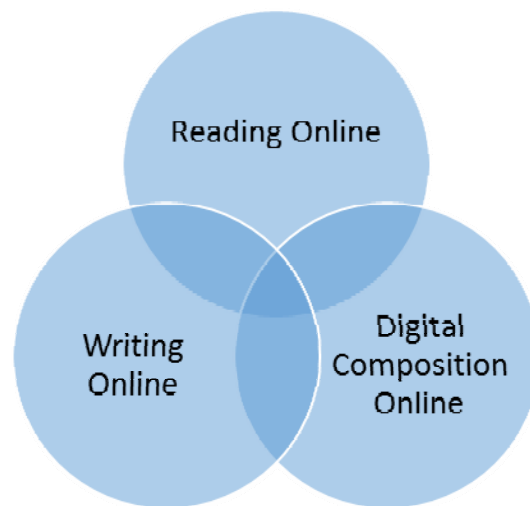

Figure 1: Venn Diagram of an Integrated Online Literacy

When communications are designed using online technologies and (as is often the case) primarily for online consumption, the literacies of reading, writing, and digital composition interact deeply and require conscious consideration in design. For example, work products are always composed with particular readers in mind, meaning that writers will need a good command of vocabulary and writing styles particular to the audience's reading comprehension levels. Further, communication designers need to be able to write in and for online settings, which means choosing when to use pure alphabetic text and when to add or lead with digital media like voice recordings, video, animation, or simple images. Within this context, the goal of this essay is to argue that communication design students and professionals should learn about the important interconnections among reading, writing, and digital composition

particularly for online settings in which the work is done or in which clients will use that work.

EARLY COMMUNICATIONS DESIGN

Long before computer technologies provided a plethora of ways to enhance communication design, reading and writing were visually enhanced with illustrations for a print-based world. In Europe's Middle Ages, for example, monasteries became the office where communications intended for an elite, literate society were created (Sorabella, 2013). During this time, particular monks performed their daily labor by candlelight in their cells or a designated scriptorium, where they copied out spiritual and classical texts, preserving them and making them available more widely. These texts filled libraries in monasteries, wealthy homes, and burgeoning universities.

The monks conducted such laborious, exacting, and vision-stealing work because they understood the need to make texts more widely available to an increasingly literate public. Just as important, they understood that reading is made both more pleasurable and comprehensible when it is designed and delivered with images. Therefore, certain talented monks illustrated, or *illuminated*, the texts with visually augmented alphabetical features and gold-enhanced pictures intended to beautify and clarify them. Illustration thus enriched such texts' already great intrinsic and monetarily extrinsic value. The artworks that accompanied these old texts are reminders that communication design is an ancient art marrying reading, writing, and design—to which twenty-first century designers and writers merely are applying new technologies.

SEGMENTED LITERACIES

Reading, writing, and design are integral to a whole literacy that enables communication among people who are located in different physical places (i.e., not physically co-located such they need to interact using the phone, Internet, or other technology). Despite their natural union in ancient and newer texts, however, the arts or skills of reading, writing, and design have been severed from one

another in academic settings. This segmentation has ancient roots in the Greek education system that separated grammar, logic, rhetoric, and the arts—an educational practice that is perpetuated in schools today.

The great philosopher and teacher Aristotle demonstrated in his books that humans think categorically—that people see the whole and then naturally separate and categorize into parts. According to Atwill (1996), Aristotle's taxonomy of knowledge segmented the domains of epistemology, or how one knows, by describing the nature of things by virtue of their purposes. For example, Aristotle distinguished the qualities and goals among such studies as metaphysics, physics, ethics, and rhetoric (Atwill, 1996). For a more contemporary example, in school, teachers break down the study of a subject to make concepts more comprehensible by naming and studying them as constituent parts of a whole (e.g., studying anatomy via the naming of the body's systems and organs). Similarly, communication designers often segment work product by clients' practical needs, communication types, delivery strategies, or the varied messages it must convey.

This approach has its virtues. There is symmetry and beauty to viewing the pieces of which a species, substance, or behavior is comprised. In school settings, breaking down the whole into categories can do much to help teachers and scholars understand the characteristics, processes, and products of a field of study. Rhetoric, one such field of study, is often is defined as the art of persuasion (Atwill, 1996) or skillful and effective uses of language. As such, rhetoric has been parsed into many subfields, which is useful because categories enable deeper theorizing and more specific statements and descriptions of practice. In turn, these statements and descriptions help in teaching students how to use language well. Categories such as audience needs, document purpose, content development, organization, style, textual and visual design, and product delivery are especially helpful to teaching rhetorical written communication to students, as well as to putting text-based writing and multimodal design to daily use in workplace and everyday settings.

ONLINE WRITING INSTRUCTION (OWI)

Thus, it is with the various subdisciplines of the so-called field of writing studies as taught in contemporary colleges. Such subdisciplines include:

- Technical/professional communication and/or writing

- Business communication

- Basic writing

- First-year composition

- Argumentation

- Literary production

- Creative fiction and nonfiction

However, in recent years, these subdisciplines have been divided further where online education and composing settings have been concerned.

For example, now that writing is taught and practiced in online environments, rhetoric scholars research OWI to consider whether there are new theories and practices relative to writing online. They want to know whether placing an activity in different setting changes how it is done as well as how the composed product is received by its audiences. Just as the process of illuminating scripture one book at a time is different from using a printing press for mass production, writing accomplished primarily using word processing is different from using pen, pencil, or typewriters. To teach contemporary writing skills, educators need to know how the actual act of composing is different as well as how reading and receiving the product differs for the audiences. Further, given that writing is taught using computers at a distance for fully online students, it is crucial to understand how it should be taught differently in that setting.

Yet, these concerns are not for academics alone. In practical ways, communication designers also face these questions as they deploy new technologies for their work and as they hire and train novice designers. Knowing what higher education values and how postsecondary educators prepare new communication designers in

their technical communications and engineering courses ultimately is important to those who hire and train them. New to practices in the past 30 or more years, both composing in online settings and delivering work products online have changed what educators know of rhetoric and all its subspecies.

REPERCUSSIONS OF CATEGORIZING LITERACIES

I have specialized in the parsing of OWI, removing it from its constituent literacies (i.e., reading and digital composition) to focus on how teachers and tutors instruct writing in online settings and how students learn from them. Colleagues and I have begun to find common principles for how to teach writing and communication design in online settings as described in *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction* (OWI Committee, 2013; see www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/owiprinciples). We have, for example, theorized that teachers and tutors must develop new and/or different strategies to help students navigate *both* learning about composition when the teaching occurs in online educational settings *and* learning to compose online. Certainly, these are two separate yet intimately connected concerns involving

- The teaching of composition using digital technologies and

- The learning and practicing of strategies for using digital technologies to compose and deliver meaningful content.

Add to these the critical importance of being able to use reading, writing, and digital composition to communicate needs and desires with clients using distance-based technologies (e.g., phone or Internet).

My colleagues and I also have advocated strenuously for making educational settings and the composing instruction fully accessible to all participants. This idea might seem to be a nonissue in the communication design workplace, where accessible software and work product are (or should be) the norm per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990). However, addressing students' different learning styles and needs by teaching them through audio, video, and still images in addition to traditional text is only

now gaining traction in higher education. Teaching about access in overt ways will lead to new professionals in communication design having self-consciously developed understanding of the company's and clients' access needs.

To a degree, I am partially responsible for a perception that OWI is different from more traditionally based communication design and writing instruction in brick-and-mortar settings. My work has focused on theorizing the various ways that teaching composition in online settings differs from doing so in onsite, traditional environments (Hewett, 2001, 2002, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004). This separation of OWI from its constituent literacies has helpful uses for developing theory and appropriate educational practices. For example, categorization facilitates examining the writing to see how it changes when students revise from text-based feedback delivered online versus in a face-to-face setting where students and instructors primarily talk about the writing.

Such study also has implications for communication designers because the global distribution of work via computer technology means that work product feedback usually is delivered in similar ways. Furthermore, those who are receiving team-based feedback to design drafts may understand or respond to that feedback differently when it is provided in-person versus through computer technologies. What academic scholars learn about how people revise when feedback is delivered through different technologies can help communication design supervisors with understanding workplace revision and the potential reasons for poorly or insufficiently revised products, missed deadlines, and inefficient processes. Nonetheless, separating the three core literacies of reading, writing, and digital composition into individual areas of study also has facilitated a simplified or even false perception of online writing as an individual, disconnected literacy from the needs of reading (online and off) and design (digital and otherwise).

REINTEGRATING LITERACIES

Fortunately, scholars and teachers in communication design and technical/professional communication are beginning to emphasize the need for reconnecting or reintegrating that which has been separated. For example, separately both Blair (2015) and DeVoss (2015) advocated for teaching multimodal composition—writing that includes the development of websites, videos, slideshows, and the like—into writing courses. Such digital composition is important because students not only encounter them in their ubiquitous uses of social media but likely will be using them for professional communications and creating such compositions in their future workplaces. This curriculum of skills is needed at every level where students learn to write in online settings.

To this end, Carillo (2015) argued for the need to reconnect reading literacy to writing because it largely has been neglected by writing educators for many years. Horning (2012) also addressed the complications of reading and digitizing for educators who work with contemporary students. Hewett (2015a) wrote that while students generally may struggle with certain kinds of reading, those who learn in online writing courses may struggle more. Thus, she outlined eight core comprehension themes that college students especially benefit from practicing in online learning environments.

Keller (2016) addressed the challenges students face in using the many literacies available to them, leading many to skim the surface both of content knowledge and composing skills. He argued that reading, writing, and digital composition all have a place in today's college communication and composition courses. Cook (2007) indicated nearly a decade ago how important immersing online instructors into the online setting is, which Hewett and Ehmann 2004) also advocated. Such immersion likely will strike communication designers as appropriate given their newest employees' needs to be immersed in effective professional—not just socially oriented—online communications. Finally, even in less academic venues as listservs (Nelms, 2016) and blogs (Warnock, 2016), scholars and teachers are arguing for creatively reintegrating reading, writing, and digital composition in online educational settings.

Such vital focus on these core technologies is coming at just the right time. Technologically enhanced—hybrid, to a large degree—classrooms are found in nearly all college courses, appropriately so as the college classroom needs to catch up with the twenty-first century workplace. Hybrid teaching and learning, which involve both face-to-face and fully online interactions, change the dynamic of any communication. How and when people share documents, talk together about their writing and work, and otherwise interact change in such settings (Snart & Paull, 2016).

At a minimum, the use of a learning management system (LMS) is common to even traditional, face-to-face classes. Hybrid online courses are becoming more popular, and tens of thousands of students enroll in them and in fully online composition courses each semester (Hewett & Warnock, 2015). To some degree, fully online courses replicate the global communication processes of geographically distributed work settings where communication design and other technical communications exist today. Special types of interaction planning such as using process scripts to manage collaborative team writing (Robidoux, 2010) become necessary in these settings. For communication designers, all of these factors mean they should begin to expect stronger literacy-focused connections between what novice designers learn in college and what they need in online workplace settings.

Those who teach and study OWI must reconnect writing to reading and design in these online environments. Students cannot, for example, write without reading their texts and instructions online. In asynchronous (i.e., time delayed) online courses especially, students find most of their learning is self-taught through what they read (Hewett, 2015a). Think about that amazing fact:

> Online students only learn about composing through what teachers or instructional designers write and develop alphabetically and digitally with images and video or audio files.

To teach asynchronously, then, educators must focus on these three literacies in careful, imaginative, and reader-friendly ways or students will not succeed.

Make no mistake: Students must be able both to read and interpret the various media through which they are taught, and they must learn to produce it as well or they will not succeed outside of school (DePew, 2015; Hewett, 2015a; Selber, 2004). To this end, Selber (2004) argued strenuously that students must be functionally fluent with the technologies they will use, and DePew (2015) maintained that they must understand the ethics and rhetoricity of choosing and using those same technologies. The twenty-first century demands such connections among literacies because their interconnections in all places outside of school require attention. Otherwise, students are receiving substandard literacy education. Educators of all disciplines cannot afford to pretend that writing instruction exists outside of a more holistic literacy that includes reading and digital composition.

THE GLOBAL SOCIETY OF ONLINE LITERACY EDUCATORS

A new organization has been developed to address the needs of this new online literacy. The Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE) was formed by interested scholars and ratified by its members in April 2016. Its mission with respect to OWI is to connect the professional expertise of all educators interested in the intersections among teaching reading, writing, and digital literacies in online educational settings. The organization's international focus is intended to unite educators globally as they struggle to understand crucial literacy interconnections that occur in individual countries and between and among nations. To do so, GSOLE is accepting members from education and business who specialize in the work of communicating through reading, writing, and digital composition.

GSOLE is seeking those who also recognize a need to reinvent these literacies as the monks once did in their poorly lit scriptoriums. As stated on the homepage of the organization:

> We are an international organization of teachers, tutors, and researchers dedicated to diversity, inclusivity, and access in literacy-based online education. We share an understanding that the key component linking all of online education is

literacy. Although online education tends to remove the immediacy and intimacy of face-to-face instruction, we suggest that successful teaching and learning in online settings are more deeply connected to literacy-based concerns than to physical presence or lack thereof. Three of the core literacies of the 21st century are reading, writing, and digital composition. However, these literacies largely have been studied and taught separately, and the resulting discussions about them have occurred in discrete sub-disciplines where their connections have not been fully explored or acknowledged. (GSOLE, 2016)

Thus, the organization invites new scholarship and thinking about how readers take in information, how writers compose text, and how the many forms of digitally developed compositions influence both those who produce and those who consume such information. This organization is connected to communication design in a number of ways. For example, targeted research can help communication designers understand better when an audience might be more receptive to alphabetic text, still images, or video in the work products they develop. Additionally, collaboration between workplace communication designers and their counterparts in education can help shape that online literacy research as well as distill useable action tasks from it.

GSOLE presents opportunities for participation in educational webinars, a research fellowship and mentoring program, an online literacy teacher and tutor certification program, an *Online Literacy Open Resource* (*OLOR*) with practical strategies for online literacy in action, and an online journal, *Research in Online Literacy Education* (*ROLE*), with its first issue due out in January 2018. All of these resources can benefit communication designers in that they will use research and practice to demonstrate online literacy principles key to working with students, novice technical communicators, and clients in both online communications and design strategies. Moreover, they create places for communication designers to share ideas and perspectives (as well as best practices) on such topics as writing for online spaces versus print and assisting clients with making digital compositions choices that are reader friendly.

In terms of *Communication Design Quarterly* in particular, I urge readers to check out GSOLE (see www.glosole.org) and see where and how their interests and skills correspond with this organization's goals. GSOLE needs the insight and knowledge of those who specialize in digital communications and technical writing particularly. Join college educators by teaching them what business trainers know; vice versa, learn from these educators what might help communication design teams and novice employees regarding literacy in online settings. For example, contribute a practical strategy to the *OLOR*, write for the *ROLE* journal, or speak in a webinar. Questions that readers might address include:

- How do communication designers and engineers use written (alphabetic) text in combination with images and video, for example, to complete work products?

- What do experts in this profession know about different audiences with different levels of reading skills that will inform the work teachers do in online education at the college level? How do they adjust or adapt materials, work products, and presentations to reach such varied audiences?

- What do novice or inexperienced employees need to know literacy-wise about distance-based communication? Are these lacking areas part of a natural learning curve for online business/communication design? Should they be taught as part of holistic literacy in college and, if so, how?

Communication designers can play a key role in helping GSOLE answer these questions by joining the organization, volunteering for the editorial boards and other positions, proposing their own *OLOR* and *ROLE* publications, and working collaboratively with online literacy scholars to make changes in nationwide education strategies. GSOLE would especially benefit from communication designers and technical writers who attend webinars and comment actively on what they know—research and scholarship need practical applications in the online communication design workplace.

CONCLUSION

Outside of GSOLE, I hope that readers will feel gratified that their unique sets of communication design skills and abilities are being recognized for what they are—integral constituent parts of a whole literacy crucial to twenty-first century education and workplace communication. Online composition demands a more holistic and, therefore, eclectic literacy approach. Together, we can reintegrate these three core online literacies to benefit ourselves, our students, and our global civilization.

The work of communication design engineers ultimately is the work of postsecondary education. Educators need to prepare students for many potential work places, all of which make use of online reading, writing, and digital composition. Whether communicating with one another through asynchronous text or deciding what clients need for their online work products, online literacy education is crucial for students who want to be communication designers or technical writers of any kind. Reintegrating reading, writing, and digital composition— particularly in online settings—into one holistic skill set will teach students about the kinds of communication for which they will be responsible in their future work. In turn, this reintegration can help new workers in such fields as communication design to compose and communicate more straightforwardly, efficiently, and effectively.

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