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Position Statement

Winston Churchill once stated that “there’s nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction.” Change is exactly what the DU Writing Program is contemplating today. With technology advancing faster than the academic world can manage, there has been increasing debate about the role that technology, in particular the Web, has in the academic classroom. Many instructors today have already taken action on this dilemma, fully integrating technology into their research and writing programs. Professor Elizabeth Sommers from San Francisco State University emphasizes the benefits and possibilities the Web offers in her article “Can Anybody Play? Using the World Wide Web to Develop Multidisciplinary Research and Writing Skills.” Charles Tyron, author of “Writing and Citizenship: Using Blogs to Teach First-Year Composition,” describes in his article the methods and benefits of using blogs in writing composition classes. Although the path to successfully integrating technology into the classroom will undoubtedly include substantial challenges, the DU Writing Program faculty must seriously consider and evaluate the undeniable benefits Web-based technologies can offer to the achievement of their goals.

As the DU Writing Program strives towards enabling its students to affectively write in different kinds of rhetorical situations, it’s important to understand how the Web and its related technologies can assist in accomplishing this goal. Having observed the progress and development of her own students, Sommers asserts that the Web “gives us a new forum, a new

playing field on which to think simultaneously and creatively about form and content, [and a way] to present and select information” (60). Using the Web as a writing platform, students are introduced to different circumstances in which to direct their writing. Sommers found students to slowly move away from the standard-research essay “to begin writing and exploring in new forms, experimenting with new challenges and possibilities” (65). Tryon has used this non-traditional idea in his classroom as well, allowing blog communities to serve as a topic of discussion and analysis in the form of rhetorical analyses. He considers blogging sites as platforms for “argumentative writing” and insists that analysis and participation in blog communities offers a connection “between the classroom and so-called real world” (128). The DU Writing faculty should use the Web, as Tryon has done, in order to offer students non-traditional methods, situations, and topics of writing that relate to the real world so that they may become “invested in their writing [and] give them a sense that writing – and citizenship – matters”(Tryon 128).

Writing in different kinds of situations undoubtedly brings with it diverse audiences and ways of interacting with those audiences. The participatory culture of the Web allows students to more easily communicate with and write for these different audiences. Students are able to “participate in a wide variety of ways” using the Web to learn how to “respond to one another’s work” (Sommers 62, 64). Tryon states in his article that students will “take writing more seriously if they are writing for public audiences on the Internet” (128). The collaboration and participation, especially between peers, involved in writing on the Web, such as in a blog community, will institute “instant feedback” between peers and even the public (Tryon 129). This community culture of blogging, and of the Web as a whole, should be of great interest to the DU Writing Faculty. If students are to be able to both receive and offer writing feedback in a

useful manner, then web blogging needs to be considered as a valuable tool in accomplishing these goals.

Working with the Web encompasses many useful elements to an academic writing class. Along with allowing participatory feedback and a variety of situations to write in and about, the Web has the potential to teach students how to appropriately cite a variety of sources. Sommers claims that “using both online and print sources, students learn to cite e-mail messages, Usenet groups, Web sites, books, electronic and paper journals, and peers’ online comments”(65). Possessing the ability to cite and incorporate these materials is essential to student’s education because the Web is “one of the media, perhaps the primary medium, in which our students will communicate in the future” (Sommers 62). By incorporating the Web into the Writing Program, the DU Writing faculty would be able to instill these skills in its students and prepare them for the technological world ahead of them.

Citing and incorporating sources is clearly an important skill that students must grasp, but it will be of little use if the sources have little or no credibility. The DU Writing Faculty should take notice to the potential the Web has to offer when evaluating sources and their integrity. Sommers explains that her students were able to “assess the value of sources, appraising their authority and accuracy in part on the scholarly reputation of the publisher, the use of other sources presenting an argument, the author’s reputation in the field, and the strength of corroborating studies”(64). By conducting these types of evaluations, students can comprehend rhetorical terms like logos, ethos, and pathos that will prove useful in their academic research and writing tasks.

Of course, change never comes easily, especially in such a crucial area like academics. There are various assertions and arguments against integrating some Web-based technologies

and ideas into the classroom. The most prominent one, discussed in Stephanie Vie's article "Digital Divide 2.0: "Generation M" and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom", has to do with digital literacy. Vie cautions that students "lack critical technological literacy skills" that inhibit their ability to "define, access, evaluate, manage, integrate...and communicate information through real-time, scenario-based tasks" (10, 13). Not having a thorough understanding of technology and its uses places a huge burden on instructors teaching a technology-integrated course. The solution to this problem is not simple, nor is it restricted to only one option. Vie argues that classes should integrate social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, into the curriculum in order to improve this digital literacy, although this is only one possibility. As a student at the University of Denver, I would argue that students, being as encouraged and engaged with technology as they are, will enthusiastically learn skills rather easily in the class and can and should be assisted by instructors when needed.

Instructor assistance brings up another issue as well. Some instructors might see technology as a disruption to the curriculum and the methods in which to teach it. The technological factor of a class could be "problematic for a traditional teacher who prefers to remain the primary authority in the classroom [and] expects a homogeneous group of students" (Sommers 66). Simply put, if an instructor has students who all possess different levels of digital literacy, then there is no general or established comprehension level which ultimately puts a greater stress on the instructor. Change does not come without some sacrifices, and I believe that although the time required to teach Web-based technologies is significant, it should not be ignored because of an unwillingness to dedicate the needed time and effort that is necessary.

As the future of the DU Writing Program is debated, it's important to examine the costs and benefits of the Web, its various uses, and its potential to fulfill the goals developed for the

DU Writing Program. Tools like Web blogs and social networking sites allow students to use rhetorical writing in a creative way while being actively engaged and interested during the process. The participative feature of the Web brings students together and encourages them to actively read, edit, and offer instant feedback on each other's writing. An abundance of electronic media on the Web offers students the ability to become familiar with using, citing, and integrating these sources. In addition, students can understand rhetorical terms like ethos, pathos, and logos when reading and integrating these sources. Unfortunately, there are also problems associated with academic Web use. The unequal distribution of digital literacy between students is a significant factor, as well as some instructors' hesitation to put forth the required time necessary to help struggling students. The DU Writing Faculty should incorporate Web-based technologies into the writing curriculum because, although the costs of using the Web are not insignificant, the benefits clearly fulfill the goals of the DU Writing Program, and do so in a way that certainly prepares students for the digital world ahead of them.

Works Cited

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