10
Audience, Purpose, and Medium: How Digital Media Extend Humanities Education

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Not so much credo as observo

The training of students to evaluate resources and compose in new media forces us all to confront the practical pedagogic and theoretical aesthetic issues behind the uses of those media. This has felt true to me from the time I first used electronic discussion boards to augment my lecture classes in literature in 1975 until today when I regularly teach two University of Michigan computer lab courses enrolling undergraduate and graduate students explicitly interested in new media. In English 415/516 Technology and the humanities (usually team-taught with Victor Rosenberg from our School of Information) and English 414 Multimedia Explorations in the humanities, the confrontation of diverse media makes issues vivid that have in more traditional courses too often fallen below consciousness for many people.

In every humanities course, so long as it requires of students at least the production of an essay, the course should to some extent be teaching literacy. It seems to me that whenever we teach literacy, no matter what else we are doing, we are also usually trying to show people how crucial it is to develop—and work within—a firm sense of audience and purpose. That is of course still true in teaching people to use, evaluate, and create digital productions in digital media, but digital media, both because they feel new to us and because their capabilities keep developing, problematize the focus on audience and
purpose, making us aware of medium itself, and thus potentially enrich enormously the conscious educational enterprise. For instance, we now must deal with the fact that choice of medium influences audience expectation. Few instructors expect paper essays to include graphics, although that would be easy enough to do today, yet all viewers of web pages do expect graphics. What happens when you do or don’t meet audience expectations in any given instance? How free is one’s choice of medium? To what extent do such choices flow from a sense of audience-and-purpose? To what extent is site design an act of setting media expectations, and hence crucial to the argument inherent in a given web site? Just as there are different sorts of books (for example, reference books to be dipped into, novels to be read sequentially), there are different sorts of digital productions (for example, web sites to be dipped into, web sites to be read sequentially). However, digital media offer new possibilities (for example, web sites that contain up-to-the-instant content, such as the current time or the current age of an author being discussed; interactivity, such as requesting and then employing the user’s name in the web page text, thus allowing for a dramatic form of direct address; random variations, such as pictures of one’s cat at different ages appearing every few seconds in text discussing the metaphor of “nine lives”; and so on). The set of expectations an audience has about any of these new media is necessarily more contingent than those raised by book culture. And yet these digital media build conventions about themselves, just as books have. The current attacks on PowerPoint (Tufte 2003) complain not about PowerPoint as it might be used but only as it usually is. Humanities education should allow not only the critique and creation of works like those we find but unlike—and sometimes better—than those we find.

Humanities education must extend itself beyond sequential literacy to deal with more capacious media and with diverse and flexible expectations for production and consumption. Perhaps most central to the evolution of expectations within this new information environment is fully accepting the notion that intellectual products are the result of the work of many people—including often the reader, now perhaps better called the user—over an extendable time rather than the work of one or sometimes two or three accomplished over a fixed time. That is, digital media, functioning as they do in the world of networked computing, often break down the boundaries we