Teaching and Technology: A Primer for Instructors Using *The New Humanities Reader*

I. Introduction

e. It *used* to be the fifth letter of the alphabet. Now it's more. Now, it's a prefix—one that, when attached to any word, attracts resources and attention, often in previously unheard of quantities: e-commerce, e-mail, e-zines, e-banking, e-books, e-Christmas, e-filing taxes, and, even, e-learning. One could imagine attaching "e" to just about anything, and the resulting combination would be not only legible, but quite probably socially laudable as well. Increasingly, we live in a world where technology is precious cultural capital.

That's all good and well if you have that capital but what if you don't? The digital divide is multi-dimensional: certainly, it cuts the haves from the have-nots in terms of who has access to technology, but it also cuts the knows from the don't-knows in terms of who can use that technology. How do we as educators acquire this "e" in order to remain competitive in our own job market? And, what's more, how do we prepare our students to read this new world of technology, and to write in it as well?

To start, we should remember that in the end "e" is a symbol, a code, rooted not just in language but in the alphabet itself (computers, after all, themselves run on codes and languages). We should also realize that the web is primarily a web of content (here, we would do well to recall the motto of the internet "information just wants to be free"). And we, as teachers, are professional readers of codes and languages. What's more, we're excellent content producers, which is vital in this cyber-powered world. This is to say that we already have the skills that are most needed in the e-world, even if we don't

yet have membership in that world. In this essay, I would like to suggest some ways to gain entry into the world of technology, some strategies to turn Expos into e-Xpos.

II. Using *The New Humanities Reader* to Teach Technology

Perhaps the first set of strategies to consider are those that don't use technology at all, those that, instead, use the essays in *The New Humanities Reader* to teach students what Cindy Selfe has called "critical technological literacy": "a reflective awareness of" "the complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments, including reading, writing, and communicating" (148). In other words, the first way to get technology into the classroom is not to use it, but to think about it. For example, Selfe goes on to offer an example from Anne Wysocki's class at Michigan Technological University, in which she gives her students the budget for the department's computer lab and encourages them to consider the various trade-offs in decisions about technology.

Many of the essays in *The New Humanities Reader* open up similar possibilities, explicitly or implicitly. You might, for example, use Peter Drucker's "The Age of Social Transformation" to locate the digital divide very locally. Drucker's seemingly uncrossable line between blue collar and knowledge workers is, really, the digital divide itself. If your institution provides little access to computers, if your students have perhaps never used a computer, Drucker provides a ground to consider the dynamics of knowledge in today's society. Students can use Drucker to map the lines of power and influence drawn by access to and deployment of knowledge, and they can apply these lessons to their own access (or lack thereof) to technology and the know how to use it.

For students who've used computers, a salient essay is Henry Petroski's "Selections from: *To Engineer is Human*." Petroski deals with the role of failure in the process of engineering and, though he is himself a civil engineer, one of his central examples concerns technology: the evolutionary development through failure of his son's Speak and Spell toy. In his essay, the story of this toy is convincing, advancing his argument about the evolutionary role of failure through consumer electronics. It would be, I think, fruitful to ask students about their own experiences with computers. Who hasn't seen a "blue screen of death"? Who has never had a computer crash and lost work and time as a consequence? Why is it, then, that operating systems don't seem to improve from this failure? And why do we tolerate it, even accept it as inevitable? If Petroski is right that failures lead to improvements, why doesn't that seem to be the case with computers? Given that the conventional narrative of technology is progressive (computers are always faster and better, using computers is empowering and time saving), Petroski gives student a way to rethink this narrative even as their experiences with the failures of technology allows them to question Petroski's valorization of failure.

If your class is particularly digitally savvy, you might want to consider Mitchell Stephens' "Thinking 'Above the Stream': New Philosophies," which examines the emergences of a new kind of literacy (what Stephens calls the "new video") based on images. Stephens argues that the decline of the printed word is perhaps not also a sign of cultural devastation, that, instead, the new video represents new perspectives for looking at things "above the stream."

Many other essays provide opportunities to bring technology into the classroom without it actually being there. Alexander Stille's "The Ganges' Next Life" examines

how technology can be balanced with spirituality in an attempt to save the Ganges River. Michael Pollan looks at the emergence of biotechnology in agriculture and the ways in which Monsanto, creators of the biotech New Leaf potato, imagines itself in terms of computers and software while Ian Wilmut, the scientist involved in the creation of the cloned sheep Dolly, wades into the tricky debate around cloning and examines the ethics of human cloning.

In using essays that deal with technology, or in creating a whole sequence of assignments around the issue, you enable your students to become better readers of technology, help them to see the issues at stake in decisions about technology with a critical eye, and ultimately give them the opportunity to make reasoned decisions on technological issues.

III. Using Technology to Teach *The New Humanities Reader*

Although computers have been used in the teaching of writing for at least twenty years, there is yet to emerge, I would argue, a solidified pedagogy which helps us to incorporate technology in ways that do not merely recreate classroom activities with keyboards and monitors instead of pens and paper. At the same time, technology clearly does present new opportunities to strengthen the work we do in educating our students. The key seems to be imagining what technology makes possible for us that would not have been possible (or that would have been much less possible) before technology.

Certainly, the web, with its vast network of information, presents such an opportunity. And, even if you yourself are not comfortable with "surfing the web," you can still incorporate this technology into your classroom by asking your students to take

the lead. For example, you might ask students to use a search engine like Google (http://www.google.com) to research an author before you start a new reading, bringing to class either a summary of what they were able to learn about the author or a list of relevant websites the class might want to visit. This practice uses students' generally stronger technological skills to show the class the place of the reading in the wider world: it ceases to be twenty pages in a textbook and becomes instead a piece of information in action in the larger social context.

If you *are* familiar with web searching and surfing, you can provide this for the class yourself. What's more, you can make use of the resources available on *The New Humanities Reader* website (http://www.newhum.com). The reader's website has resources for both you and your students, ranging from sample assignments and classroom practices to self-directed tutorials and links for all of the readings. The website, moreover, gives you the opportunity to contribute your own content in the form of assignments and sequences. This means that the website is not simply a storage site for static information but is instead the locus of a community.

You can use the web to create a community for your class as well, by building for or with the class a simple homepage. The idea of creating a website is, no doubt, intimidating for some people; however, there are resources available to make this project both free and relatively easy. Netscape (http://www.netscape.com), for example, offers free software called Composer that lets you make basic webpages in a WYSIWYG ("What You See Is What You Get") interface. These pages can then be hosted on a free site such as Yahoo's Geocities (http://geocities.yahoo.com), or your institution may provide webspace to anyone with an account on its computer systems. The homepage,

certainly, is a way for you to communicate with your students and share important information such as the class syllabus or assignments, but it can also serve as a way to forge classroom community by asking the class to make decisions on colors or design or by contributing content.

The web allows for communities of teaching as well. *The New Humanities Reader* website is one model for forming such a community on a national scale, but you could also create a more localized community. Teachers within a program, department, or institution of learning can come together through a simple website that shares site-specific assignments, classroom practices, and pedagogical strategies. This website, too, can be a shared experience: not only can your local community of teaching share responsibility for maintaining such a site, but you can get together to build it, in the process sharing knowledge of, not only teaching, but website construction as well.

One help in creating such a community, particularly across geographical distances, is email, which can be an asset in your instruction as well. If you don't have a service such as America On-Line (AOL) or if your institution does not provide you with an email account, you might want to consider a free email account offered through services such as Hotmail (http://www.hotmail.com) or Yahoo (http://www.yahoo.com). Collecting email addresses from your students and adding them into an email "address book" provides a quick way to contact your entire class. You might use this to send them reminders or assignments, or, I was at one conference where a teacher described the positive effects on student morale that resulted from her emailing the class a supportive note each evening. Instructors with more knowledge of technology, or with more support for technology at their institutions, may want to ask if listserv's are available. A

class listserv acts as an email discussion list: you can use this to send information to the entire class without remembering all of their email addresses, or you can prompt the class to engage in discussion about the issues of the readings outside of the classroom.

This sense of an extended classroom enabled by technology is possible with something like a forum as well. Forums are web-based bulletin board systems that allow for posted discussions so, unlike a listserv or email list, there's record of what's been said. Forums *do* require some technological resources; however, there are many free or inexpensive forum software packages that run on PHP, a free web-scripting language, and mySQL, a free database package. One such system (a very robust and powerful one) is vBulletin (http://www.vbulletin.com) which costs under $200. Free PHP-based forum systems are also available at PHP script repositories such as HotScripts (http://www.hotscripts.com) or the PHP Resource Index (http://php.resourceindex.com).

Free web scripts open up a number of innovative pedagogical opportunities. For example, you could use a free script written in PERL, another web programming language, to create a class collaborative paper. Cliff's Never Ending Story Script (http://www.shavenferret.com/scripts/) is one such script. You could provide a sample argument and then ask the class to construct the paper collaboratively, with one student writing the introduction and then students taking turns writing body paragraphs. This collaborative model of paper writing not only further builds class community but also enables group learning.

So far, I have tried to focus on the technologies most readily available. Even if you don't have a computer yourself, for example, you might be able to use a library computer to check a Hotmail account. However, if your institution has a computer lab

available for classes, then multiple new opportunities are available. This computer classroom could be used for web-enrichment of the essay by looking at web pages connected to the issue, but it can also be used for in-class drafting, which lets students leave the classroom not only with ideas for their paper, but with an actual file that contains the start of a draft.

Depending on what software is available in such a computer classroom, you can also introduce your students to the possibilities of new media. Consider, for example, asking them to use a graphics program such as Photoshop to create a visual argument. Moving argumentation into the visual underscores the ways in which images carry information; moreover, switching registers from the written to the visual can provide new perspectives for your students. Visual arguments challenge students to manipulate images in ways which clearly convey intended meaning, and can introduce students to the complexities of visual communication.

IV. Conclusion

There seems to be, always I think, some sense of the inevitable with technology, a sense closely tied to evolutionary, progressive, and teleological narratives. We would do well to challenge these narratives themselves, to question the goals and functions of technological progress. However, to be sure, rejecting technology does little to question its ideological hold. I am reminded of Donna Haraway's classic call to feminists in "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." One of Haraway's main goals is for feminists not to reject technology out of hand, to come to understand instead the ways in which systems of oppression (what

Haraway terms the “informatics of domination”) begin to be encoded in technology. Haraway’s solution is the cyborg: a monster in some respects that adapts and absorbs, accepts and rejects, with one simple goal in mind—survival. We would do well to heed Haraway’s call as well, to realize that however we feel about technology personally it’s an issue that cannot be dismissed, only dealt with.

We can deal with that issue in any number of ways, but surely one of the most potent methods is to confront technology head-on in our teaching and in our classrooms. That doesn’t necessarily mean we need to embrace technology, but it does mean we need to learn how to read it, and how to deploy it in humane ways. *The New Humanities Reader* provides one avenue for such a confrontation, through the discussions of readings to the ways we choose to enact our pedagogy around technology. I hope I’ve given you some ideas on how you yourself can enter into technology, ways to turn e from a scarlet letter into a tool of learning.

Works Cited

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