"ORDINARY PEOPLE DO THIS": RHETORICAL EXAMINATIONS OF NOVICE WEB DESIGN

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EVEN AS WEBLOGS, content management systems, and other forms of automated Web posting and journals are changing the way people create and place content on the Web, new Web pages mushroom overnight. Many new Web designers produce Web pages that seem to ignore fundamental principles of "good design": full of colored backgrounds, animated pictures, multiple colors and styles of text, and little to no navigation or Web-based structure. Even in courses devoted to Web design, students still produce pages that lack unity, coherence and emphasis: "though they [students] seem to understand (and can critique) others' efforts, they're stymied when it's time for production. Few have the skills or experience *writing* in this medium" (Yancey & Wickliff, 2001, p. 180). Similarly, individuals working on their own or working from documentation struggle with being able to create Web pages due to the same lack of experience writing on the Web.

Few resources exist that approach Web design as a unique rhetorical process (an exception is Mason, 2001). Most scholarship and practice treats writing for the Web either as a transfer of existing skills and processes for writing print documents and/or as a series of technological challenges that must be mastered to successfully create a Web page (Handa, 2001). It is imperative to understand the specific processes of composing on/for the Web to develop effective pedagogies, documentation, and scholarship.

Research Questions

Three sets of questions were the focus of this study:

1. What are the (rhetorical/composing) processes that novice Web designers engage in when they create Web pages? Why do they make the particular choices they do? Where do beginning designers turn (or not turn) for help?
2. How do novice designers represent their identity on the Web, and how do they decide what is the most appropriate self-presentation? What types of *ethos* do beginning designers attempt to represent in their designs?

3. Is technology the only challenge for novice designers, or are there rhetorical challenges as well?

Approach

This project began with a review of literature and scholarship related to current pedagogies of Web design. The major research forming the dissertation consisted of a case study that followed a group of undergraduate and graduate students participating in a voluntary group for beginning designers which met every 2 weeks in an on-campus computer lab equipped with a variety of Web editors and other software. Technologies and sources of assistance that were most popular among novice designers (software, online help, and very occasionally, documentation or tutorials) were also collected.

Initial and final interviews and surveys; participant observation; regular archiving of Web pages; and collection of related materials such as notes, sketches, and documentation allowed for the creation of a thick description of how new designers build pages on the World Wide Web. Grounded theory (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1997), which generates categories and narratives about the data from within the data itself, was used as the primary methodology for analysis.

Findings

The major findings uncovered two struggles that the designers faced: a rhetorical struggle in terms of creating identifications and developing new strategies for a new medium and a technological struggle in deploying technologies in the service of their rhetoric. Instead of merely encountering problems with using the technology to create their Web pages, participants struggled equally with making rhetorical choices about the content, arrangement, and form of their Web pages.

The novice designers in the study did not always see Web design as a process or as connected to other conventional notions of writing, visuals, rhetoric, or design. When asked to describe specifically their processes for creating Web pages, most of them pointed to technological struggles or specific technological steps that they had to take to "master" particular aspects of Web design, but almost all of them also identified and engaged in heuristic processes as an integral part of Web page creation. Audience, purpose, and situation all shaped the designers' ideal and actual designs.

A recurrent desire to appear "professional" (a term that the designers could never completely articulate) online was often their guiding

aegis in making specific design choices. This desire to generate a professional *ethos* led to the deployment of identification strategies (Blakesley, 2004; Burke, 1969) and the use of imitation and modeling (Corbett, 1971). Participants would seek out the pages of individuals who had constructed similar identities or the pages of individuals who held positions that they wanted to attain. They would then imitate the page design elements as well as the page content of their identified models on their own pages. These practices caused the designers to make more conservative choices and to produce pages which resembled each other even when working independently.

Complicating the designers' attempts to build a cohesive professional identity online were the technologies used for Web page design, which functioned as a mediator between them and the tags used to build Web pages. While What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) editors should have helped designers compose Web pages with greater ease, the editors themselves were not novice-friendly. The designers were stymied by not knowing the specific technical language of Web design which the technologies built into their interfaces, particularly their menus. Many of them complained about the technologies' not "speaking their language" through their interfaces and online help.

Due to these difficulties, the designers mostly focused on editing and changing the features of text through the familiar word-processing interface the editors provided. The presentation of a Web page (or a potential Web page) within an editor as if it were a word-processing document led them to associate Web pages with print documents, even though Web pages and printed documents are different. The editors stripped away from some their sense of the Web as a new medium (Batschelet, 2004). The few Web-specific features that they were able to identify and work with on their own included changing the background color and inserting images. The relative simplicity of these tasks for a novice designer, as well as their novelty to someone used to working within the often color-free constraints of print design, may also explain the sometimes exotic choices made by novice designers.

Significance

The research and findings in this dissertation offer an initial assessment of how beginners to Web design learn to write on and for the Web with implications for research, teaching, and documentation and interface design. First, this research demonstrates that there are aspects of writing on/for the Web that are different from aspects of writing in/for other media. Web design and Web-based writing require

more than just transferring ideas, information, knowledge, or meta-knowledge from print-based genres to Web-based genres. Although it does share some features with processes for writing in other media, the process itself is fundamentally different, and the genres of writing produced are different as well (Crowston & Williams, 2000; Devitt, 2004; Miller, 1984; Shepard & Watters, 1998; Sidler, 2002). These findings ask us to reconsider how process and genre are (re)mediated through the interfaces and technologies used.

Second, the study suggests that teaching strategies for Web writing should include creating heuristics that work with beginning designers' tendencies to use models and teaching technological procedures as they map to learner-centered processes (Flower, 1994). Third, this study demonstrates how designers describe their processes and examines how technologies (particularly Web authoring programs) impact the ways in which designers can think and learn, which offers insight into how to create documentation and interfaces for software that enables people to work on and for the Web. The designers' problems with documentation point to a need for reconsidering how we help beginning users.

Finally, this research demonstrates that Web design and Web-based writing require more than just transferring ideas, information, knowledge, or meta-knowledge from print. Although a great deal of work has been done in studying how technologies change aspects of writing and the writing process, interest in how particular technologies change and impact the writing process seems to wane as those technologies become more integrated into middle-class Western culture. It is imperative that we continue to "pay attention" (Selfe & Hawisher, 1997) to Web writing as it becomes more ubiquitous in our writing lives.

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