Foreword

Ever since the first human family living in a cave stamped handprints on the wall, the technologies of writing have shaped how we write, what we write, and how we learn. A long succession of media for writing have influenced our ideas of authorship, text, personal identity, social relations, and community.

When computers first appeared on the scene, they were seen as calculating machines, but alphabetic coding soon led to text editors, and before long, full word processors. Thus, the computer became another writing technology, one with significant advantages over earlier ones in terms of speed, revision, formatting, and distribution. The extension to tools such as networking, video, graphical interfaces, and mobile devices has placed the new digital technologies at the center of writing today.

The evolution of media has led to a reconstruction of the meaning of literacy, especially when viewed as a set of social practices surrounding the creation, distribution, use, and interpretation of texts. It has become more multimodal, with “text” now encompassing interactive graphics, music, and video, as well as print. It has become more collaborative, with readers and writers sharing creations and interpretations. That collaboration extends to the computer as a partner to help with search, copy editing, formatting, and display. Literacy has also become more dynamic, now often seen as an accompaniment to other activities, not just an alternative to them. How many events today go unrecorded through tweets, photo blogs, online video, or social media? These recordings are integral to today’s literacy.

Taken together, these changes call us to rethink literacy, and especially what we mean by writing. It would be foolish to think that such a rethinking could be reduced to a simple formula. The variation and complexity of new media defy simple analysis. They continue to change, even as we struggle to make sense of them, and their long-term effects may be quite different from what we see in the short term. In such an environment, our inquiry needs to be open rather than closed, provisional rather than definitive, exploratory rather than constrained. We need an experimental form of knowing. Our education system has often been slow to respond to these changes in media. Educators/scholars have few resources to draw from to make sense of the changes.

In Exploring Multimodal Composition and Digital Writing, Rick Ferdig and Kristine Pytash have assembled a set of chapters that adopt the necessary experimental stance. The chapters provide educators with a map for their exploration of writing. In full accord with the goal of exploration, the map may have some unexplored regions and others with only rough coordinates. There is no final analysis or simple prescription, but the map offers a significant guide for anyone interested in contemporary research on writing and technology. It links theoretical insights with empirical studies.

The book explores writing across a diverse range of both formal and informal settings, seeking a deeper understanding of the new writing, not a simple categorization or accounting of it. Some of the chapters explore how writing technology and practices are changing; others focus on learning to write;
still others emphasize the teaching of writing or teacher education. Many of the chapters explicitly address the changing definitions alluded to above, and none of them take the handed down definitions of “text,” “writing,” or even “technology” for granted. Some chapters take those re-definitions into the praxis of classroom teaching, assessment, out of school activities, or teacher education. They examine the impact on different groups, such as children of different ages, adolescents, bilingual learners, poets, and academics.

Adopting this book as a guide, the explorer has a start on ideas such as multi-modality, graphic novel, remix, and social media. More importantly, these ideas are connected with or embedded in discussions of design, community engagement, critical pedagogy, social action, literacy, teaching, and learning. The explorer has some notion of where to start, but also models for how to explore further. The book is an excellent companion for that exploration.

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