Foreword

The essays in this collection advance the project of articulating online workplaces as real and significant, as complex networks of relations that we need to take seriously. The emergent culture of networked communication poses many interesting challenges for researchers, teachers, and writers, as the essays in *Internet-Based Workplace Communications: Industry & Academic Application* make clear. In an emergent culture, even the terminologies we use to identify the subject are contested, making it difficult to agree on what we're writing about in the first place, not to mention our reasons for studying it or how we might best meet the challenges it poses.

What do we mean, for instance, by *workplace*? A workplace is simply a *place* where people *work*, right? Most will recognize that the *work* in *workplace* is a complex term with a wide range of meanings. But these days, even *place* need not be construed strictly as physical space, a geographical location in the material world. The structural metaphors of the World Wide Web already define the Internet as a place: we *travel* the information *superhighway*, visit *sites*, chat in *rooms*, manage *domains*, sit on *couches* in MOOs, and so on. Yet even though we invest digital space with the spirit of place, it's an inside joke (but with everyone on the inside). We know that virtual reality is still "unreal," an imitation with just enough difference to remind us of the "really" real. Films like those in *The Matrix* trilogy reinforce this impression that we live in two worlds: one manufactured by computers imprisoning us in an illusion (the matrix) as avatars, and another we're stuck with but that offers some hope of freedom and a better life as living beings (Zion). As Neal Stephenson wryly put it in *Snow Crash*, in this world, we're meatware, living avatars in the hardscape.

As many of the essays in this collection suggest, it may be time to rethink our conception of workplace to allow for the possibility that real work takes place in digital spaces, that the modern workplace is not simply a site, a home office, campus, a "place of employment," or a "work environment" in the desert of the real. The place of work is online, too. It is a place where real people work and communicate, where things get done, and where we spend many waking moments. This place is not an illusion. It is every bit as real as the ground we walk on, for many of the same reasons that thoughts or feelings or dreams are real.

We have naturally carried with us our familiarity with the real to digital spaces, using our metaphors to make it comfortable, but we now need to examine whether the forms of understanding that this familiarity cultivates has prevented us from seeing what's going on there. Students, teachers, and researchers need to know the lay of the land. The contexts of time and place shape our rhetorics in nuanced ways, or at least ought to in the *kairotic* moment. Inexperienced writers—regardless of the situation—usually presume that what worked elsewhere will work anywhere; they sometimes don't appreciate—or even recognize—how situations change or may be different in concrete ways. *Kairos*, the sense of what goes with what and where and when, is particularly challenging when the where and when is digital and thus capable of perpetual transformation. What's the first response to such complexity? All situations are the same, and we, inexperienced or not, can rely on the familiar terminology of material and print culture—not to mention the land and timescape—to explain and rationalize our acts in the digitized workplace.

Those of us who teach communication need to imagine the digital workplace as new territory so that we can help people communicate effectively and creatively when they work there. As John Logie notes in "Cut and Paste: Remixing Composition Pedagogy for Online Workspaces," institutional, context-based priorities shape production and practice. He reiterates James Porter and Patricia Sullivan's call in *Opening Spaces* for "reflective practices (*praxis*) that are sensitive to the rhetorical situatedness of participants and technologies that recognize themselves as a form of political and ethical action" (p. ix). Ideology exerts its influence online just as it does in bricks-and-mortar workplaces, and perhaps more obviously so. As Logie makes clear, traditional notions of authorship have regulated copyright and intellectual property law as well as composition's conception of plagiarism. When we apply reflective practices in online workplaces—to describe what people say and do there—we can see more clearly how the ideology of authorship prescribes practice and pedagogy that may no longer serve our needs or the needs of academic and corporate institutions. With such analysis, writes Logie, we learn that we can "create discursive power *without* necessarily assuming the mantle of authorship." We begin to appreciate differences manifest in space and time—context—and in other terms, not ones laced with the terminologies that reduce the unusual or different to the familiar. Essays in this collection by Mark R. Freiermuth, Stacey L. Connaughton and Brent D. Ruben, and Melody Bowdon describe how workplace simulations and virtual networks draw out these differences for students, making composition more real, but also reinforcing the principle of *kairos*. Connaughton and Ruben, for instance, note that in such settings, "Success involves creating messages that are well received by authorities, leaders, experts, and by peers, subordinates, and members of the general public. And, it is often the case that discourse that works well for one group does not resonate with others." Brian Still shows us how the Open Source community functions

as a fascinating workplace even when the "work" may be unpaid or unattached to any commercial enterprise, and even when the people clearly have other identities they play out in other contexts. In fact, it is the nature of OS community as purely digital that makes it such a powerful force, one that we can learn from as we imagine new workplaces. Wendy Warren Austin, Jo Mackiewicz, Shawn McIntosh, and Rhonna J. Robbins-Sponaas and Jason Nolan, each in their distinct ways, show us how people work and write in digital spaces. All contribute to our understanding of what the nature of *work* in this new *place* looks like so that we'll know it when we see it, evaluate it, or perform it ourselves.

In "Telework: A Guide to Professional Communication Practices," Nancy A. Wiencek shows us how radically different the online workplace really may be. As I read her essay, I couldn't help but wonder why I hadn't yet imagined teleworking as a site for internships and apprenticeships. It's easy for me to understand why, in many respects, I'm a teleworker myself, even though I hold an academic position in a real place with walls around the classrooms and people strolling the campus. I am frequently approached by students at Purdue about the possibility of internships with Parlor Press, the publishing company I started last year. I would love to work with students in internships, but an internship with the Press would break the mold of internships, here or anywhere, I think.

In almost all respects, Parlor Press is a digital phenomenon. We publish "real" printed books, but almost all of that work is conducted via the Internet, with manuscripts, correspondence, and all the usual activity of a press managed electronically. There are no board or marketing meetings to observe in the hardscape. The books are printed in Tennessee, hundreds of miles to the south. I worry that the student's internship experience would be markedly different from what we might have originally intended when we created such opportunities in the curriculum. I might rarely see interns, for example, and we might meet only once or twice in-person. Then I catch myself using *seeing* and *meeting* in the senses we're all used to, but that the digital workplace challenges. Internships with Parlor Press would be *digital* internships and would almost certainly throw into question typical requirements that internships be in some setting, with the sense that *setting* does not entail the *digital*. A workplace observation for a Parlor Press intern would have to happen in that "other" place, with perhaps some assistance from hidden surveillance cameras, keyboard trackers, and some spyware. What would we need to do to our conception of internships to imagine them as teleworking?

The pace at which software systems change makes keeping up to speed extremely difficult. The production methods, distributed responsibilities, document cycling protocols, and even communication norms of professional writing, teaching, and research in the digital workplace are the forms of discursive power we

need to cultivate in students. But we need to ensure we have this discursive power ourselves, too. Perhaps most perplexing about Internet-based workplace communication is that we have only begun to understand the nature of this power, and we may be even further behind the curve in wielding such power ourselves. These essays collectively suggest that we had better get started if we hope to give our work as teachers and writers the value and attention it deserves.

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