Chapter 21

The Mutual Presence of RP–7 and the Future of Virtual Collaborative Writing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines virtual collaboration, including the production and use of writing, between doctors at different hospitals mediated by RP–7, a robot that enables a specialist at one hospital to evaluate the vital signs of and provide diagnosis for a patient at another hospital. Analysis of RP–7 is situated in a theoretical deliberation about the shift from print to digital texts and technologies. I argue that a consequence of this shift is the loss of mutual presence—the alignment of materiality, practice, and expertise—in the production and use of texts. This alignment is transparent and intrinsic to print texts but is lost in digital environments precisely because they afford access to texts irrespective of a user’s background, location, or access to and familiarity with other tools, technologies, or workplaces. Study of the writing used and generated during the collaboration between doctors mediated by RP–7 is grounds for the claim that the future of virtual collaborative writing in professional contexts will involve the re-alignment of mutual presence. In other words, the success of digital writing technologies in social practice will depend on the extent to which they bare similarity to, rather than differ from, print texts and technologies. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the value of this research to both academia and industry.

INTRODUCTION

A recent front page article in the Sunday New York Times (Lewin, 2009) captured a prevailing perspective on digital communication technologies. Lewin’s article depicted the future as one that is exclusively digital, a departure from the materially-bound, print-based texts common to workplace and educational settings for centuries. A simple contrast represents digital texts literally as the “future,” while print texts are “history.” There are at least two important oversights that this binary perspective perpetuates.
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One is that print texts—like the “textbook”—are soon to be a thing of the past. The second is that the complexity and dynamic quality of print texts are greatly oversimplified.

Lewin quoted Sheryl R. Abshire, the chief technology officer for the Calcasieu Parrish school system in Lake Charles, LA: “Kids are wired differently these days. They’re digitally nimble. They multitask, transpose, and extrapolate. And they think of knowledge as infinite.” She then drew a simple contrast to the print qualities of textbooks, saying that students “don’t engage with textbooks that are finite, linear, and rote,” adding that teachers need to get “beyond the plain vanilla curriculum in the textbooks.” Later, Lewin cited California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger as describing textbooks as “antiquated.”

This contrast between digital and print texts, one apparently entrenched not only in popular culture but also education and government, paints digital texts as superior to print ones. Digital texts open up knowledge as “infinite” and interactive, while print texts are “plain,” and outdated. Never mind, for the moment, that the discoveries and inventions of Galileo were mediated and constructed by print texts, or that Newton formulated the principles of calculus without the aid of computers, software, or Wikipedia. And one has to wonder how Abshire would respond to the fact that three-hundred years ago, while making engravings of art and poetry, Blake wrote, “when the doors of perception are cleansed, all appears as it is, infinite” (Blake, 1997).

The assumptions about the relationship between digital and print texts articulated in the Lewin (2009) article are a microcosm of widespread beliefs in both scholarly and popular circles. The crux of these assumptions is that digital texts are both “new” and that print texts are archaic and replaceable. Crystal (2006), for example argued that Internet users have developed an entirely new language called “Netspeak.” This perception of digital communication is one that sees it as a break from print-mediated communication, rather than an extension on a larger continuum of mediated communication. Again, the notion that digital media are a clear break from print media and the past is the basis for the belief that print media are replaceable. In popular literature, similar claims are made: “The Net is controlled by no one; no is in charge... The users of this media are creating an entirely new writing space, far different from that carved out by the printed book,” wrote Kelly. He continued, “Net writing is of a conversational, peer-to-peer style, frank and communicative, rather than precise and self-consciously literary.”

The rigid contrast Kelly depicted of digital and print media exemplifies a popular and growing mentality that digital media are “entirely new,” and that writing which occurs in this space is altogether different from that which occurs in print media, which are implicitly associated with the caveman days, as that kind of writing is “carved out by the printed book,” in the manner a Neanderthal might carve out of drawing on a cave wall.

The primary argument of this chapter is a challenge to these prevailing views on the relationship between digital and print texts: the future success of digital texts and technologies in industry and academia will depend on how well they make up for what has been lost in the transition from print to digital media, not how different or “revolutionary” digital media may be in comparison to print. The critical variable that has been lost in this transition is mutual presence, which I define as the alignment of materiality, practice, and expertise in the production and use of texts. In what follows, I demonstrate through the example of the RP-7 robot how medical practice makes up for this loss through the robot’s physical presence in a hospital room, which aligns a digital network with the medical expertise of doctors.

My argument is especially important for the future of virtual collaborative writing because it challenges practitioners to question prevailing views on the relationships between digital and print texts, such as the one Lewin (2009) reported. Assumptions that practitioners of virtual