Chapter II

Hypertext Theory and Web Writing Assignments in the Writing and Professional Communication Classroom

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Abstract

This chapter proposes that composition instructors focus less on the technical aspects of having students get Web pages published and more on teaching them basic hypertext principles, visual design principles, and writing strategies for presenting arguments in hypertext form. More and more professional and technical communication courses are incorporating Web page creation and/or website design into their pool of required
assignments, while at the same time a growing number of first-year composition instructors are also beginning to incorporate Web pages into their repertoire of genres. This convergence is creating interesting paradoxes for instructors of both types and for website developers in the workplace. If basic hypertext principles are taught in earlier prerequisite courses, technical communication instructors could spend more time teaching more advanced hypertext theories and instructing students in the more technical aspects of the software they are using.

Introduction

The college composition course is a staple of college life. Everyone who goes to college either has to place out of or take English composition, a requirement which frequently has as its goal the ability to write for academic audiences. The typical assignments students expect to encounter are research papers and opinion essays. However, with more and more frequency, composition instructors are exploring and incorporating different kinds of writing within their classrooms. The most recent composition textbooks and handbooks often include a chapter on online writing or even website development. However, despite the new coverage in textbooks, far fewer students expect to develop a website as one of their course assignments. Yet with the unrelenting and unavoidable emphasis on technological literacy the government is imposing on education even from the earliest years (Selfe, 1999), composition specialists would be shortsighted if we ignored writing for the Web as one of the sites for writing that college students are likely to encounter and produce. For the most part, “web development” classes are most frequently housed in computer science departments; it is where one would more immediately think students would learn how to create websites. The average person—or even the average English professor—is less likely to expect students to learn about hypertext theory, visual design principles, or spatial metaphors in the required composition course. On the other hand, the expectations we have of technical writers are intertwined with the world of high technology. For example, it would not be at all uncommon if the reaction at a social gathering were, upon discovering one’s occupation is technical writer, “Oh, so you must develop the firm’s website.”

Whether or not technical/professional writers actually develop or contribute to their firm’s website is irrelevant; the association between technical writing and website development remains. In fact, developing a Web page is often among the course requirements for a technical writing course, and the further into a professional writing program one progresses, the more advanced his or her tools,
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