Chapter 20

Inventing Non-Discursive Text in Virtual Collaboration Environments

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ABSTRACT

Virtual collaborative writing must acknowledge and encourage a range of symbolization practices because textual products simply are likely to be hybrids of words (discursive) and visual images, aural images, haptic images, olfactory images, and even gustatory images (all non-discursive). Though digital technologies are still limited to aural and visual technologies, the authors must theorize collaboration for and within media that are as yet not widely developed or possible. Today’s collaborative environments require more from interfaces if we are to invent texts that become edited images, Web pages, films, and/or animations. This chapter argues that virtual collaborative environments must accommodate the invention of non-traditional, multimodal texts.

INTRODUCTION

Much is written already about the importance of creating virtual environments for effective collaboration. In fact, most of the research about collaboration is about identifying and assessing technologies primarily through the perspective of how well they afford collaboration itself: how well they afford collaboration itself: how well the technology allows for “media richness,” how well the technology allows for social structures and “information-processing schemas,” or how well these two may interact together as part of a “biological evolutionary theory as a lens for understanding e-communication behavior” (Kock & Garza, 2008). The efforts to date seem to focus on how well we collaborate in virtual environments without sufficient attention being paid to what products collaborators are striving to consume, produce, and distribute. This chapter starts with the question, “How have changes in writing products (textual artifacts) complicated virtual collaboration?” Or, asked differently, “In the era in which both industry and academia are creating products that are necessarily multimodal—constructed with varying degrees of
multiple modes such as printed text, audio text, video text, etc.—and requiring multiliteracies, how must collaborative technologies for virtual environments also change to keep up with this rich array of multimedia?” In particular, this chapter considers these questions by focusing primarily on video collaboratively constructed for the Web because this type of text significantly changes the nature of writing and collaborative production overall. In doing so, it implicitly underscores the importance of developing a culture of collaboration whereby that culture reconsiders collaborative writing as beyond text alone, which is the first principle of virtual collaborative writing that grounds this book.

Even if the question about what virtual collaborative writers are producing through collaboration is set aside for a moment, a question remains regarding how various new media products construct themselves rhetorically. Subsequently, a question emerges regarding how they create a view of collaboration that is may be more fluid, continuous, and recursive than before. In other words, if a collaborative interface does not afford the invention of non-traditional texts (such as hypertext, audio, or video), then it actually may be reproducing a bias towards discursive, or word-based texts strung along in sentences. Such a writing environment also must consider how multimedia texts challenge traditional notions of the single writer producing a static text. Given that there has been a paradigm shift from the single-writer constructing monomodal, or typically text-based, documents that remain fixed through time, that shift can be considered seismic in the composing of writing. It necessitates, as well, a new paradigm of the product and process of writing (see Chapter 1). Key to the point of this chapter, writing cannot be considered monomodal anymore. At the least, much writing is visually oriented with both discursive text and non-discursive text (such as visual images). Further, web-based writing engages aural modalities, and eventually may engage haptic (touch-based), olfactory, and even gustatory images.

These changes about the way writers are viewed also changes the way collaboration is done, virtually or not. Add to this point the dissolution of time and space in today’s collaborative environments, and the result is a remediation of both the way writing happens virtually and the way it continues to happen as the texts mutate, get absorbed, become viral, disappear, and even reappear in a new form. In other words, just because a team of collaborators build a website (as one example) from geographically and temporally dispersed physical conditions does not change the fact that the multimodal product produced is dynamic, constantly rewritten, redistributed, mashed into other digital constructions, and perhaps remediated into an older or newer technology. That website, in other words, must have had as its context a rhetorical situation that assumed an already dynamic, multimodal, fractured, and vastly distributed life cycle.

With this complexity in mind, it is important to imagine which affordances are needed from virtual collaboration environments to create texts biased towards non-discursive symbology and distribution patterns rather than the traditional, text-based symbology and distribution patterns. Indeed, there are few virtual environments that have the type of tools needed to collaboratively compose multimodal textual hybrids—hybrids that include still, moving, or holographic images, hypertexts, textures, sounds, tastes, or aromas, through synchronous and asynchronous interfaces. In short, virtual environments that allow for virtual collaboration of Non-discursive, multisensory texts simply do not yet exist.

Clabby (2002) indicated that “the next big step in human communications will be to make our electronic communications multimodal—in other words, it will be the use of electronic media to provide three-dimensional visuals and audio as well as scent, touch, and taste sensations” (3); that is, communication technologies are moving toward a type of convergence of sensory input and output. We have overly relied upon (and, conse-