

A Techne for Artful Choices in Digital Writing

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I'll tell you the problem with the scientific power that you're using here: it didn't require any discipline to attain it.... You didn't earn the knowledge for yourselves, so you don't take any responsibility for it. –Dr. Ian Malcom in Jurassic Park

In just the past few months, several news stories have detailed the misuse of two popular networking/self-publishing Web sites, MySpace.com and Facebook.com. In one case, 20 middle school students were suspended and another faces expulsion over a MySpace group that directed anti-Semitic language, threats of violence, and hate speech at a female classmate (“School Suspends”). In another case infamously (and, I believe, unethically) reported by Rob Capriccioso for *Inside Higher Ed*, four students at Syracuse University experienced a range of disciplinary action for posting what University spokesman Kevin Morrow described as “hateful, damaging and harmful remarks” about a TA on Facebook. The TA was both named and pictured in the Capriccioso article (Capriccioso).

I have to wonder whether these acts of stupidity on the part of some MySpace and Facebook users, and even Rob Capriccioso, are encouraged by the ease of current technologies driving Web publication. While we shouldn't allow ourselves to believe, by virtue of the rampant and at times sanctimonious media coverage of such abuses, that this is the *only* type of activity enabled by the ease of form-based Web publishing, I believe that a techne governing digital discourse must confront the issue of ease—particularly as it relates to the ethical dimensions of any rhetorical production occurring via technology.

Simply put, technologies for producing digital discourse have become too *easy*, and that's not entirely good. In *Emotional Design*, cognitive scientist and design theorist Donald Norman recounts the debut of Betty Crocker cake mixes in the 1950s; the user/baker had an *easy* relationship with the technology: “just add water, mix, and bake” (55). Norman cites a pair of market researchers who suggest why, despite positive taste-test results for the cakes themselves, the original mix products failed on the market: “The cake mix was a little too simple. The consumer felt no sense of accomplishment, no involvement with the product.” (Goebert and Rosenthal qtd. in Norman 55). The solution? Require the consumer to add an egg as well as water. Doing so, Norman notes, “gave the act of baking a sense of accomplishment, whereas just mixing water in the cake mix seemed too little, too artificial” (56).

Am I alone in feeling anxious that Web-driven form-based production technologies like MySpace or Facebook or even WebCT and Blackboard have delivered a techne of “just add water, mix, and bake”—or, more appropriately, “just type, click mouse, and publish”? “Push-Button Publishing for the People” was Blogger.com's original slogan, suggesting the good of a quasi-democratized tool for unleashing one's self on the Web. However, unlike the failed Betty Crocker mixes of the 1950s, these *easy* technologies are being adopted by millions of people; a February 2006 CNN/Money story reported that a whopping 12 percent of all online advertising was viewed on MySpace

(Maier). That becomes an unsurprising figure, though, when you learn that as of March 17, 2006, MySpace.com memberships numbered more than 63 million, or roughly the population of Thailand, and twice the population of Canada (CIA – The World Factbook). So why did water-mix-bake fail and type-click-publish explode? One possible compelling answer comes from Norman’s market researchers Goebert and Rosenthal, who claim that the cake mix “made [the 1950s user] feel useless, especially if somewhere her aproned mom was still whipping up cakes from scratch” (qtd. in Norman 55). On the Web, there are comparatively few “aproned moms” whipping up Web sites from scratch; those who are are creating the so-called Web 2.0 sites like MySpace and Facebook. These technologies, along with user-hosted prefab content management and blogging technologies like Drupal and Wordpress, are the route to a voice on the Web, quickly supplanting the old What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get, or Wizzy-wig, Web development software like Dreamweaver, which supplanted (or so we thought) the need to learn markup languages.

In her oft-cited essay “What’s Practical about Technical Writing?,” Carolyn Miller follows Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in identifying *phronesis*, or prudence, as the mode of reasoning appropriate to praxis/conduct, placing *techne* as the mode of reasoning appropriate to production. She stated, “An understanding of practical rhetoric as conduct provides what a *techne* cannot: a locus for questioning, for criticism, for distinguishing good practice from bad” (23). In the context of her essay, of course, Miller is describing technical writing as “the rhetoric of ‘the world of work,’” where a written product is always already assumed. The key is that a written product, and any *techne* of written rhetoric, is based on lifelong language skill acquisition; as we look to a *techne* of digital rhetoric, we don’t have such a lifelong acquisition. Technology philosopher Peter Caws wrote that “the parallel with language learning should be obvious enough” for even the *techne* [though he uses the word *praxis*] behind “elementary” technologies like buttons on our clothing, shoelaces, eating utensils, and even razors and toothbrushes. “Special technological *praxes*...” Caws continued, “are acquired subsequently in the context of special training” (232). We may believe, of course, that this will change; but even if Generation Y is techno-savvy, they’re not *techne*-savvy, thus a *techne* of digital production will still involve special training.

What I currently struggle with in Miller’s essay, though, is whether praxis or conduct “aim[ed] at its own performance, at ‘doing well’” is motivation enough to take the sort of ethical responsibility she’s arguing for as we look to the context of digital technologies like MySpace, where the steps of a performance are minimal, *easy*, and require very little investment of users. Regardless, *techne* and *praxis* continue to share an important and uneasy relationship; but I’m inclined to believe that if the *techne* lacks, so will the *praxis*. After all, we have witnessed such things as failed writing assignments where students, despite our best efforts as teachers, simply would not or could not invest themselves in the material, thus rendering the “performance” and its locus “for distinguishing good practice from bad” pretty much moot.

A *techne* for the *artful* production of digital discourse requires investment, and that investment may well be the element that helps distinguish good practice from bad, in

a certain sense. Returning to the MySpace and Facebook debacles I mentioned earlier: students have always disliked certain teachers and classmates, and beside the violence of Columbine, they have expressed their dislike in every discursive manner from unflattering graffiti and doodles on desktops to artful film sequences critical of teachers in, say, Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. Here, too, the issue of ease arises; a student armed with a Sharpie can mark up a desktop, but there's a much more involved process and structure in filmmaking. Even if my comparison here is ultimately unfair and false, it's hard to argue with the idea that digital technologies like MySpace combine the ease of the Sharpie with the dissemination and impact, if not the art, of the film.

But we cannot, of course, talk about digital production technologies as some kind of monolith. They run a wide range, from the advertising-driven, Web-available form-based publishing technologies like MySpace and Blogger (which, to reveal my biases even more, I find to be as satisfying as filling out a 1040), to consumer-oriented proprietary software packages usually bundled with new off-the-shelf PCs or consumer hardware, or available in the aisles of Best Buy's software section, to expensive professional software packages like Macromedia Suite, to open-source languages like XHTML, PHP, and JavaScript.

The range of technologies suggests a fairly clear distinction between two groups of users: a consumer group, which Andrew Feenberg has called "sheltered users," and an engineer or designer group. The consumer group of users is constructed through these technologies as a group that's geared for completing very common tasks in fairly programmatic ways and opts for simplicity, ease-of-use, and by extension, a very limited range of possible action and expression. Think back to the cake mix: there's really no encouragement to add a dash of cinnamon or whatever to make the cake your own. And even to do so would not change the fundamental ease of the cake, just as the ability to customize a page template on MySpace or Blogger doesn't really make the page your own: it's an issue of personalization versus personality. As design theorist Jessica Helfand puts it, "'Personality' is what makes you special. 'Personalization' telegraphs the illusion that you are special..." (23). And personalization may be fine, if users are primarily concerned with expedience in publishing and ease of expression; but it is insufficient for a fully-realized techne of digital production.

Consumer technologies are, obviously, geared towards *production* only in so far as they open possibility of continued *consumption* (e.g., create a free account on Shutterfly and upload your digital photos so you can share them on prefab Web pages, but also so you or your friends and family can order prints and other photo gifts featuring your kids or your dog or whatever). I strongly sense that the majority of technology use in writing classrooms has been of the "sheltered user" variety. Cindy Selfe notes that the traditional split between the arts and technology has "structure[d] the responsibilities of English studies professionals in some very comfortable [*—and I would say easy—*] ways. ... we can use technology in our classrooms while generally absolving ourselves" from a series of responsibilities Selfe identifies like planning for, thinking critically about, and systematically assessing technologies (143). Yet even Selfe's statement, despite the fact

that it focuses on responsibility, still positions humanities instructors as sheltered, if potentially critical, users.

But it is the second group of users I've mentioned, the designer group, that I have in mind for a *techne* of digital production, since it is the designer/engineer who has the greatest possibility for rhetorical action—and who carries the highest degree of responsibility for what is produced. Currently, though, there are too few designers outside of technology fields. This has to change, and it will change, I believe, by implementing a *techne* of digital production that constructs ourselves and our students as members of the designer group.

So what does my proposed *techne* look like? In *Designing with Web Standards* Jeffrey Zeldman outlines three aspects of Web production that various designer-oriented technologies support: structure, presentation, and behavior. I think that these are essential for understanding the tasks and inherent responsibilities of a designer.

Structure is a key and, after the Wizzy-Wig, often overlooked aspect of digital production. But structure is extremely powerful when guided by the open-standard XHTML or XML markup languages. Structure is what enables the reliable transfer of information between human beings and the machines they use. Structure allows us to mark up text simply according to paragraphs and headings, or to more advanced structures relevant to particular pieces of discourse—from a collection of baseball cards to an anthology of poetry. Structure not only adds semantic metadata to text, but also allows for the inclusion of media elements from photographs to Flash movies—and allows for alternate, accessible content to be presented based on an end-user's equipment or abilities.

Related to structure is **Presentation**, which is the visual design of a piece of electronic discourse. If structure is the iron girders of a building, presentation the building's façade. Of course, presentation has important rhetorical effects on an audience's perception of the discourse. Through a language like cascading style sheets (CSS), presentation is intimately linked to the structure of a document—but remains separate from structure. The power of this might be best demonstrated by these two samples of my vita—it's the same XHTML document treated with two different style sheets—one for the screen, the other for print—to address the needs and expectations of users in different media.

Finally, there is the aspect of **Behavior**, or what we more commonly call interactivity, which is linked solidly to Structure but also affects presentational elements. There seems to be a universal complaint, both among Web developers and computers and writing scholars, that interactivity is absent from most Web productions; I tend to believe that's because we haven't yet thoroughly worked out the relationships between structure and presentation. But we will.

The key difference between sheltered users and designers, then, is that while a sheltered user has content and places or posts it via something—a *something* which the

user probably ultimately doesn't understand, other than its magical appearance somewhere on the Net—a designer user develops content that accounts for the three interdependent aspects of structure, presentation, and behavior. Returning again to technology philosopher Peter Caws:

The button-pusher has nothing interesting to do with technology, and his use or abuse of it, even if it has disastrous consequences, does not touch its essence.... The trouble is that the results of button pushing are out of proportion to the effort, and this is likely to produce also a disproportionality between decision and purpose...(236).

The techne I envision for digital production deliberately makes things more difficult for designer users, whether they are teachers or students. This is a hard sell, particularly to teachers who feel intimidated enough by technology of the consumer ease variety. But we should remember that rhetoric, unless it takes the form of a Mad-Lib, is not easy. A techne of digital production is an effort to remove the disproportionality between effort and consequences: only when we *earn* the knowledge of production from a designer user standpoint can we more fully take responsibility for what we do with it. Digital writers must do the hard work of fashioning their content into a sound structure, developing unique presentational designs, and considering audience interaction with their finished works.

Will the simple, “just add water, mix, and bake” technologies continue to attract more sheltered users? *Of course*. Will some sheltered users occasionally suffer for their actions online? *Of course*. J.D. Biersdorfer notes that “making Web pages intuitive, accessible, and nice to look at will be a snap compared to screening out or shoveling off scads of pointless pages, screeching scrolls of hate, and other detritus from the collective consciousness that finds its way online” (94). I would hope that a techne of digital production that insists on investment and ethical responsibility and that balances effort and consequences would not just reduce bad productions Web audiences must sift through, but encourage producers of Web content to strive for *better* productions.

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