

Mutualizing the Mix

CCCC 2010, D.24, “Scholarship, remix, and the database”
Bradley Dilger, Western Illinois University

[slide title] Part One (three minutes)

We convene under the rubric of remix: a theme sharply different from those in recent memory. Gwendolyn Pough’s call for papers, “The Remix: Revisit, Rethink, Revise, Renew,” has stricken me, from the moment I first read it, with its literal nature. [slide Pough] Many of the usual tropes are present: open-ended questions, nods to the local culture of the conference site. But metaphors of streets or waves are absent. I read her call, then, for its pragmatic approach as much as its content: encouraging us to speak directly to specific practices, relationships, and intersections with cultures outside the walls of this hotel. In the spirit of writing to the CFP, I adapt Pough’s pragmatic stance toward the subject of this panel, scholarship, databases, and the remix.

Last night, the CCCC Research Committee sponsored a panel called “Remixing our scholarship for audiences and stakeholders outside of Cs.” An email promoting the event suggested [slide event], “This discussion should be of interest to all those invested in making our research reach the ears of those who do not read our professional publications or attend our conferences.” As you might guess from my title, “Mutualizing the Mix,” I share this goal. [slide ???] For databases, that means targeting Google, not CompPile, so we might more effectively make policy. Or so we might hear Cindy Selfe and Barbara Cambridge talk about their appearances on Oprah, or their TED talks, rather than op-eds to counter Stanley Fish’s in the NYT. [slide ???]

Pough calls these kind of conversations by several names, including “cross talk,” a term which raises the spectre of garbled discourses. [slide crosstalk] Indeed, transcriptionists often write “CROSSTALK” when people on television talk shows yell at each other, and the result is unintelligible. Given that I’ve put Oprah on the table, that’s a little troubling. But “cross talk” points to a specific kind of remix: conversations, not “mashups,” or “cut and paste.” Let’s face it, the former is far more appealing to most compositionists, and conversations will certainly outnumber mashups at the conference this week.

The CCCC Research Committee event took place before the conference. Pough suggests the opposite approach, when she writes [slide pough], “I’d like for the 61st meeting of CCCC to encourage cross talk within the field and begin to revisit, rethink, revise and renew our field.” Within the field, to begin to renew the field. Within the field, before we reach out of the field. We must first consider how we mix with each other, that we might more effectively encourage others to mix with us as well.

So my presentation today offers an eventually-outward-looking “Mutualizing the Mix” as an effect of an internal mutualizing of our conversations, our cross talk, however noisy they may be. [slide links] Speaking of links, accessibility, and standards, I will encourage specific practices and a particular database logic. These practices are necessary if “remix” will grow beyond a conference theme to the more productive internal conversations which can support extra-disciplinary dialogue.

Part two (five minutes)

What can we do to give our scholarly conversations more momentum? First and foremost, [slide we must...] we must reconceptualize the link as a core part of the database and an essential component of every unit of discourse we value. While this seems obvious, it's worth noting how many of our conversations aren't linkable. [slide JAC] Articles in Composition Studies, JAC, and many other journals don't provide single article links. Readers can point to an issue, but not an article itself. This presentation? [slide CCCC] There's no unique URL for it on the convention web site. [slide CCCC] All presentations, via search, share this URL. This is the norm, unfortunately. We need to transform our scholarly conversations, formal and informal, so we can link to them from other conversations, formal and informal, and ensure links are a primary attribute of our emergent database logic.

I'm using the phrase "scholarly conversations" deliberately [slide Links] because links are crucial for formal, published scholarship, but also for work such as weblogs, notes, syllabi, and conference presentations. For the purpose of cross talk, we should not differentiate between these forms. As Alex notes, Google and YouTube are archiving them anyway, assuming they are on the public web.

More conversations on the public web, and linked to the public web, means that we'll have a chance to do more effective reading of each others' work: again, a key element of conversation. Ann Blakeslee and Rachel Spilka have pointed to structural problems in technical communication research which decrease the readership of journals; I'll argue that similar problems affect all of rhetoric and composition. Reading, and response, are both facilitated by better availability and better interchange.

Tom Coates pointed out that permalinks transformed a collection of disconnected blogs into a blogosphere. [slide permalink] Stable, direct links transformed blogstreams into resources which readers could return to over time. Citations provide some of this functionality. But directions to a link aren't the same as a direct link. You can't hand the former to a robot. [slide permalink] Not to mention that our citation formats handle URLs in disturbing ways. While Digg, Reddit, Delicious, and a host of other services have built robust communities around exchanges of links with corresponding metadata and commentary, rhetoric and composition too often opts out of these discussions by trafficking in unlinked media.

How do we correct this problem? [slide]

1. Give everything a URL. This can be direct or indirect: the object itself, or an object or page which points to it. Like the pages for articles in databases Alex is discussing.
2. Strive for link stability. Linkrot is probably unpreventable. But mechanisms such as the Document Object Identifier (DOI) reduce its impact. At the least, we need to be responsible about redirection. Ideally, we'll push our professional organizations to participate in these efforts.
3. Concatenate links into feeds. Links become linkstreams, and moving through them tells a story of its own. Feeds make data manageable, keeping cross talk from becoming noise, and facilitate participation from non-human agents.

[slide ACM] As Derek notes, data interoperability should be the long-term goal for curators of rhetoric and composition databases: an automatically generated and updated web of citation and influence which tracks works cited and citing. [slide ACM] Ideally, this would be open to all

elements of conversation: not only scholarly articles, but conference presentations, weblogged reactions, and theoretical antecedents as well. We are a long way from that goal. But we will never achieve it until we represent the elements of our cross talk with stable, reliable links.

Part three (seven minutes)

My next focus is accessibility, a term with at least three meanings relevant for remixing rhetoric and composition.

In a technical sense, [slide accessibility] accessibility means ensuring everyone can read, hear, or touch their way through our discourses. Our cross talk must be accessible to all kinds of users, in all kinds of contexts. Do our journal web sites work with keyboard navigation? Do our presses offer digital files to consumers for Braille rendering or text-to-speech? Are social media we use friendly to assistive technology? The list goes on. As a field, we simply must do better here. Clay Spinuzzi, Karl Stolley, John Slatin, and others have provided exigence, frameworks, and examples to follow. In brief, we can't cross talk with those who can't read, hear, or touch our words.

At the C's research event last night, Mike Palmquist advocated a stronger commitment to open access publishing from our field. I was pleased to hear that, though I'd hoped to hear it from more than one of the seven panelists. Derek is pointing out several ways access restrictions delay the circulation of our scholarship and shift decision-making about curation to third parties who may or may not share our disciplinary goals. At my university, we no longer subscribe to *TCQ*, *JBTC*, *Computers & Composition*, and other journals on my regular reading list. [slide budget] We can't afford them all, so we have to make decisions. The impact is clear: raising barriers to each other's work makes cross talk less likely. I have the resources to subscribe to these journals, and I do. But my graduate students must rely on ILL, or borrowing copies of journals from me, if I have them. I understand some of the economic arguments against open access. But for me, the ethical arguments crush them flat. [slide restricting] Restricting access to our scholarship, much of which is at least partially funded by the public, is the wrong choice for us now and in the future. We gain nothing from this but preservation of an outdated publishing model. At the very least, all of us need to take advantage of pre-print clauses in publication agreements, and post our scholarship in findable, accessible ways.

Accessibility also means using language, and forms, which enable cross talk over and through cultural, disciplinary, departmental, and institutional barriers. Here's one way to imagine those structures as a continuum. [slide continuum] Again, at the Cs research event, Kathi Yancey pointed out that we do a poor job of partnering with other departments at the university. Forget about #1 for now. Can we get from, say, #2 to #5? Or #4 to #5? Looking at our scholarship, sometimes I wonder. Many of our journals have poor metadata: article abstracts which fail to move outside very focused disciplinary language—if they have abstracts at all. Missing, incomplete, or impoverished keyword sets. We can't talk about each others' work if we can't find it, or easily work through what's out there to find what's most relevant. [slide CF] Here, for example, is an abstract from *Composition Forum*, the journal I work with. I'm not sure this abstract allows, say, someone from women's studies to make an educated decision about the relevance of this article for a project about women and the web. I have my doubts, frankly, about what it offers a rhetoric and composition scholar. [slide CF] Too bad, because it's a good essay. Accessible abstracts and metadata won't get us tenure, but they are equally important to the

influence of our work in a world where Google Scholar is the way that influence is determined.

I want to close by talking about standards. [slide Star] In the first chapter of *Standards and their Stories*, Susan Leigh Star and Martha Lampland write, “We hope to contribute here, in a modest way, to the dulling of the impulse to standardize everything that seems to grip modern organizations. We are not, in any sense, against standardizing—only against society’s romance with it” (4). I’m with them in wanting to transform that romance into a more productive relationship. Ideally, our professional organizations—NCTE, CCCC, ATTW, RSA, etc—would work together to standardize the way they publish and archive scholarship, creating common infrastructure which could serve the diverse needs of all areas of rhetoric and composition. [slide arxiv] I’ll argue this effort can and should extend outside the field. When I look at efforts like the pre-print server Arxiv.org, I have to ask myself, “Why aren’t we doing that?” We might not be as well funded as high energy physics researchers. But certainly, we are no less culturally relevant. [slide arxiv]

At CCCC 2008, I suggested that scholarly web sites in our field, including journal web sites and archives, should follow a common set of standards intended to improve findability and usability. [slide standards] These guidelines include the two items I’ve already discussed: stable, reliable links and accessibility. In *Protocol*, Alexander Galloway suggests that standardization can be tactical, in a bit of a contradiction: tight restrictions on technical details allow tremendous freedoms. Forget NCLB; that’s hierarchy, not protocol. [slide standards] Like the Web Standards Project (WaSP), [slide open] I believe open standards facilitate diverse collaborations, and I hope to promote their constructive use through advocacy, documentation, and presentation of high-quality examples. That is, I want to follow their production oriented approach, not the proscriptive method usually associated with standardization. Given a common approach, we can begin to develop the kinds of infrastructure Arxiv.org provides to scholars in the sciences, or ACM Portal for computing.