Research interests

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My principal field of study in English is composition and rhetoric. As a composition studies scholar, I seek to better understand the institutional position of composition and history of teaching writing in American university curricula. Historical and theoretical work from writers such as Susan Miller, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, and Richard Ohmann has convinced me of the importance of continuous review of the theories and practices of composition, as well as of the importance of composition itself. But I also study theories of composition and rhetoric because I enjoy teaching writing and want to be a better teacher. I am eager to increase my participation in the conversations about teaching which mark composition studies, especially theoretically informed reflections which connect historical and cultural analyses to classroom practice.

Teaching in Florida's Networked Writing Environment (NWE) sparked my interest in composition studies. Victor Vitanza, Kathleen Blake Yancey, and Cynthia Selfe, among others, introduced me to computers and writing, the discipline of composition studies in which my work is focused. I attempt to follow the example set by these scholars, who apply modern and classical rhetoric and literary theory to problems in computer-assisted learning. Similarly, I seek to build connections between important texts in media studies, such as W. J. T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory,* and the work of composition and rhetoric. As I noted in my review of Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media,* the decline in the novelty of "new media" presents an opportunity for rhetoricians studying new forms such as electronic mail, weblogs, and synchronous communication.

My studies in composition are shaped by the theoretical approaches of grammatology and cultural studies. Following Jacques Derrida, Walter Ong, and my adviser Greg Ulmer, I mobilize the history of writing to better understand the evolution of media and the complex relationships of individuals, institutional formations, and ideology. Understanding of media studies relies on comparative work, leveraging the history of writing in work with new forms, and considering the practice of writing from a philosophical perspective. My studies are always production oriented, with recursive testing and application of theory in practice.

Like James Berlin and John Trimbur, I value a cultural studies approach to composition studies, considering the social discourse of the classroom by investigating the socioeconomic makeup of culture at large. I rely on writers like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Evan Watkins for both methodology and their prescient analyses of culture and society.

Ease

Since I finished the examination for my Master of Arts in Fall 1998, my principal research project has been the construction of complexity and difficulty in American culture and education. I have discovered that ease is the most powerful force affecting the definitions of complexity and difficulty today, if not for the past two centuries. The oldest definitions of ease, comfort, leisure, and effortlessness, remain relevant today. However, the number of qualities which define ease, and by which it is made manifest, has increased steadily as the importance of ease has increased. From the mid-18th century to the present day, composition teachers and textbooks have used ease pedagogically, attempting to make grammar, rhetoric, and other tasks associated with writing "easy." In a parallel evolution, as the United States industrialized and developed a consumerist economy, ease became a powerful ideology with profound effect on work, leisure, and the activities of daily life.

The relationship between these two functions of ease—pedagogy and ideology—is the subject of my dissertation, "Ease in Composition Studies." In this manuscript, I define and historicize ease, demonstrate the fascinating connections between ease and composition, and outline some of the negative consequences of mobilizing this ideology as a pedagogy. I show the strong bonds between ease and literacy, and suggest that the lack of success of applications of ease to electronic media is the result of insurmountable epistemological differences. My dissertation concludes by reviewing literary theory and philosophy which critiques ease, named as such and in other forms, in preparation for developing alternatives to ease more suitable for electronic pedagogy.

I expect my studies of ease to continue for at least the next three years, and at the current time envision two book projects: one which focuses on the history of ease and its effects on consumer culture, cultural studies, and a second which builds on that analysis to consider the role of ease in composition studies.

Other research interests

For the time being, completion of "Ease in Composition Studies" is my primary work, and attention to other projects has been temporarily suspended. Other interests include rhetorical work in collaborative learning, especially investigation of the role of dissent and consensus; pedagogical applications of synchronous collaboration environments, such as MOO and IRC; analysis of courseware such as WebCT and BlackBoard, and development of free software alternatives to these systems; critique of the adaptation of usability theories into a rhetoric of technical and business writing; and editorial and interpretive theory of texts which exist in multiple versions.

Please refer to my web site or contact me for a more detailed "future projects" list.

Technical work

I have always supplemented my theoretical and pedagogical studies with some attention to computer programming and networking. While a graduate student, I have built on work experience I gained working as a prepress specialist and production manager. Understanding Unix-style operating systems and learning how to program with Perl and in MOO environments has enabled me to develop software for pedagogical and practical use. Perhaps more importantly, knowledge of programming and conventions of computer science has extended my vision as a computers and writing scholar. As Robert R. Johnson has noted, most cultures of computing are system-centered: design and development decisions are made based on affects for the system, not for those who use it. (My investigations of ease have shown me system-centered thinking, and problems Johnson identifies with it, are by no means unique to computing.) Learning some of the language of computing has helped me sharpen my critiques of system-centered practices and ensured that development processes which I coordinated followed a more user-centered model.

Working in the NWE, I had the opportunity to supervise two large projects which required both technical skill and awareness of computers and writing theory. In May 1998, I rebuilt the NWE's MOO environment, MOOville, and administered the MOO for the next three years. While NWE information technology specialist, I redesigned the NWE's help pages and web site, working with NWE instructors, students, and administrators.

I would welcome the opportunity to serve as a technical adviser or liaison to computing support staff, as I did while working in the NWE. Though I wish to limit my direct involvement with programming, I also hope to continue participating in the development of software and other resources useful for teaching composition in networked environments.