Academic Writing in the 21st Century: Emergence of the Hypertext Essay.

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Abstract

This presentation explored the nature of hypertextual or electronically enhanced essays. The purpose of the presentation was to illustrate the change in academic writing which is occurring because of electronic text forms and hyper-linking. The author attempted to show that academic writing (and the culture surrounding writing) is becoming more commonly focused on web-based spatiality (linked text) than on traditional linear (page-to-page) forms. The presenter described three levels of hyper text essays.
The presentation included actual models of student hypertext essays, a discussion of the development of hyper-textualization supported by handouts and a PowerPoint demonstration, and an open forum for questions and discussion. The following paper was referenced and distributed as a handout following the presentation.

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In the late 1990's, as electronic text became more common, several authors began to

recognize the significance of this new kind of discourse and began to describe relevant

issues. Landow discusses how hypertext has changed the nature of narrative and other

forms of discourse, literary education, and the politics of text. He considers the following

issues:

- Reconfiguring narrative.
- Reconfiguring literary Education
- Politics of hypertext: Who controls the text?

Landow describes the connections between hypertext, the emergence of web linking, and the new interrelationships between readers and writers world side.

Commenting on the emergence of hypertext as a genre, Parfitt writes the "link" seems to give hypertext its differentiating characteristic—the reader can explore a world that exists not simply "in front and behind" but through paths in many directions.

Reed Elseveier Business Publishing notes that

> links are now so much a part of the way people work that we tend to take them for granted. But the ability to leap from anywhere to anywhere is still the stuff of science fiction. For centuries documents have been read in a liner way, with all that this implies of structure and reader control. They hypertext link means that readers can choose (up to a point) the paths they take through documents. (p.28)

Feldman provides an excellent overview of the significance of the hyper linked essay in "The Link and How We Think: using the Hyperlink as a Teaching Tool." Among her significant points:

- The hyperlink is a new kind of punctuation mark that, like more traditional punctuation marks, signals a change or a kind of clarification within (or at the end) of a sentence structure.
- While the traditional print medium holds up stability and order as ideals, the hyper linked environment connects masses of reticulated, even self contradicting texts
- Hyper linking provides for conceptualized and meaningful learning—reading takes placed in an inquiry rich environment.
- She cites Steven Johnson who notes" [with hyper linking] students can see the world not as librarians do but as poets do, an interconnected world teeming with associations and communities. (p. 155)

Lang discusses the issues related to the electronic dissertation including

- electronic archiving of dissertations and the meaning of publication
- advancing digital literacy for both students and faculty
- the ability to create and publish dissertations using a variety of electronic tools and software,

- the ability of dissertation committees themselves to utilize such electronic tools,
- the ability of graduate students to present work and research in alternative environments (p. 687)

Abdullah notes that because of the "e medium" (word process and email), both the process and content of writing are evolving (3).

As can be seen, several articles and other texts are now appearing which discuss the emergence of hyper text writing, the construction of meaning in such writing, and the resultant changes in writing protocols, reading, and writing instruction.

Theorists in the late 1980's and early 90's predicted changes in writing instruction and writing activities afforded by hypertext essays. While authors examined the emergence of word processing and the use of computers in the classroom as learning tools, more recent texts have examined the development of hypertext and hyper linked writing. What is the hypertext essay?

For the purpose of this discussion, the hypertext essay is a digital version of printed text. This type of written document has proliferated in the "traditional" college writing course (and other college courses, of course). The hypertext essay also provides the "means" for the development, implementation, and evolution of on-line coursework and communication. A hypertext essay in its most rudimentary form is a word-processed document clearly identifiable as an essay—it has the graphemes, paragraph structures, and academic style characteristics typical of any (traditional or printed form) essay—but it can exist and convey readability without appearing on paper. However, this definition is far too limiting. Hypertext essays do not merely "exist" differently than traditional printed text—they allow for far different kinds of student/teacher interaction and for

student involvement with the essay and the kinds of meaning constructed within the essay and beyond. Another significant feature of the hypertext essay is its ease of storage and accessibility—word processed files are easily filed and archived on floppies, zip dries, memory sticks, CD ROM's, hard drives, and servers. They can be maintained and accessed quite differently than traditional paper documents. The digital document was publicly available in the late 70's and early 80's and began to flourish in the 1990's.

Such an essay can exist entirely in "hyper" space. Hyper-centered text (any piece of writing existing as an electronic file) may include the writer's ideas, and the referenced ideas of others, but also has the ability to construct expanded meaning because of links to the World Wide Web. According to Davis, the "founders" of the *hypertext* concept believe that h*ypertext* can remove the distinction between writer and reader.

Electronic conversations between student and teacher, and the kinds of webbed meaning that can be constructed using the hypertext format, give the hypertext essay its greatest power as a meaning-making and learning instrument. Importantly, instructors can provide students with feedback, using email (or uploads in some environments), in "real" academic time. Students no longer need wait until the next class meeting (possibly several days or even a week) to receive an evaluated assignment. Word processing, because of its inherent editing and reviewing capabilities, lends itself exceeding well to process pedagogies (for illustrations of process pedagogy, see Peter Elbow's Writing with Power) – writers can more easily generate many drafts of a document, each reflecting changes and improvements. Plus, most 21st century word processing programs allow for the insertion of "objects" into the document. The general term object might include pictures, text boxes, and graphs—both the inclusion of such items and the writer's

decision to use such objects influence the meaning created and contained in word-processed academic paper.

Three levels of hypertext essays

Each level represents increased complexity. In this discussion, the hypertext essay form is considered to be a word-processed document. But certainly, hypertext can also be manifested in email documents, power point, html, or other browser –related software files such as Front Page.

Level one hypertext essay

The "simple" word-processed document. These documents are hypertext essays when they do not appear in printed form—that is, the instructor reads them in digital form only—such as on floppy disks or as email attachments. Their electronic "character" allows for quick editing and revision. Writers are able to modify such texts without the daunting "mechanical" constraints associated with the traditional typewritten document. They can be accessed from different sites (such as servers and CD ROM's). Such electronic essays give students and instructors the ability to dialogue on and within the text using enabled word processing features, including available tool bar functions: highlighting, grammar and spell checking, insert comment functions, colored font, and any other appropriate tools. These available editing and reviewing functions are helpful for identifying surface structure errors and eventually clarifying meaning in the essay.

Level two hypertext essay

Level two hypertext essays contain all the features mentioned above. However, they also contain embedded hyperlinks that serve either as targets to quickly move the reader within the essay or as links to references found on the Internet. Targets (an intra-paper

link) within the level two essay help the reader move quickly through the paper—clicking on a target will move the reader down (or possible up) to the linked section of the essay. Works cited pages (MLA style) and reference pages (APA) frequently contain hyperlinks to Internet sources cited within the essay. A mouse click on such a link will connect the reader immediately to that Internet source. This can be helpful to any reader – certainly a follow up researcher or an instructor—the source can be visited (and evaluated) immediately as the reader interacts with the essay. (Care must be taken when instructing students how to construct bibliographic entries for electronic sources. Both MLA and APA have web sites with appropriate information—also, many online learning centers exist.

Level three hypertext essay

The level three hypertext essay is the focus of this study. Level three hypertext essays contain all the features mentioned above. Significantly, they also contain embedded links to files from other software programs and/or to web sites other than those used for reference purposes only. For example, a level three essay might contain links to a power point presentation or video clip as well as personal web sites and available relevant downloads. Such essays might contain hyperlinks that could connect the reader to other essays, or personal web pages, created by the essay's author. Level three essays demonstrate a potential multimedia approach to the creation, and formation, of academic text. Level three essays seem to be less of a contained product than essays written before digitalization (think of the traditional 20 page academic term paper with its inherent features—outlines, body text, appendices, and bibliography page(s)—as a product in and of itself). The level three hypertext essay may be as much a gateway to information as a

"finished" packet of information—hyperlinks can imply movement to places "far beyond" the original content or thrust of the essay.

Several issues related to the level three hypertext essay can be addressed.1. Is access to information the same as "knowing" the information?" This question needs clarification and can only be addressed in the context of the purpose of any written document.

Imagine an English professor walking through the college's library with his class, meanwhile responding to questions about Shakespeare. Student Bill asks, "Do you think Iago's motives were based on jealousy?" What if the professor responded by pointing to the stacks and said, "Read volume PR 6545.32 page 99"? In a sense, this can be what a hyperlink accomplishes—it directs the reader to a source, or site, without commentary, without guidance, without bias.

Responsibility for synthesis has moved from the writer to the reader. The hyper linked source can be the story itself rather than support for the story being told within the essay. Writers of such essays choose pathways for the reader to follow. Hypertext essays do not begin and end—in effect, the hypertext essay is a fluid document, a portal, which requires the reader to go elsewhere for ideas, answers, and meaning. The hypertext essay as described above seems to shift the responsibility for meaning making from the writer to the reader. The writer of a hypertext essay can use other types of software, such as PowerPoint, to package his/her own thoughts in a fresh manner. PowerPoint can provide the writer with a means to provide introductory remarks, or overview remarks, to an academic essay in an attractive, corporate-like polished fashion.   Hyperlinks can be used

to open spreadsheets with supporting data, or video clips, or sound bites. Links to author-created files using other software packages can strengthen academic text.

Hyperlinks, especially those providing direction to "additional or supplemental information" web based sources, may take the reader completely away from the original text and present other kinds of interpretive evidence or enhancement during the reading experience. Meaning "made" in a level three hypertext essay can be far less synthesized than in traditional academic writing. Perhaps the writer needs to know less about the subject he /she is discussing. Potentially, the writer can compensate for a lack of internalized information (learning, knowledge) by understanding hyperlink construction. Emphasis on text creation my shift from writing good paragraphs to developing good "learning links" lists. This has implications for both writer and reader.

How does the use of linked text influence the writer/ reader?
Students who have matriculated through school since the 1990's may be more comfortable with electronic text than older readers and writers. Word processing, at the community college level, is a skill utilized by most composition students. But the use of a link to expand meaning in the academic text is recent. Many students who have been word processing and "surfing" the web have seen these activities as being somewhat removed from each other. However, students seem very comfortable with the windows interface environment—the world of pop-ups, quick sound bytes, and simultaneous information sources.

Readers perceive hypertext essays differently than printed pages. The reader's learning style will influence this perception, of course—this is true with any

reading/studying experience. But does the reader sense a difference in the power or veracity of academic text that uses hyperlinks? The reader's expectations may be very different—hyper linking may seem helpful or daunting, depending on the readers' own computer literacy and back ground with interactive text.

Is linked text a new type of discourse or merely an expansion of traditional "referential" text (the common practice of quoting other sources in academic writing)? The issues noted above are inter-related—and questions associated with the use of evidence or other sources are not new to the digital age. The use of evidence to support arguments was a problem oft studied by the ancient orators.

Quintillian, writing in the first century CE, provided advice for would be orators and rhetoricians. In a passage discussing the merits of using evidence when pleading a position, he writes

> Indeed, there is scarcely any common place [evidence] so common, which can incorporate well with any pleading, unless it be bound by some link to the particular question under consideration; otherwise it will show it is not so much inserted as it as attached, either because it is unlike the rest, or because it is very frequently borrowed without reason . . . (104)

[Notice the "anachronistic" use of the phrase "some link" in the quote above!]

The writer who elects to use linked text of any sort is probably making three assumptions:

- The reader will be able to use the links and navigate through/beyond the word-processed text successfully
- The hyperlinks will "work" and open/initiate the linked site.
- The reader's experience with the text at hand will be expanded or enhanced by the linked site.

The first two declarations above are self-explanatory. Hyperlinks to URL's or other programs that do not "open" or work correctly certainly have a negative impact on the

reader's relationship to the text. But number three is key to understanding the paradigm shift that has occurred. Certainly, the inclusion of any extra-textual materials (quotations, paraphrase, pictures, appendices, charts) in the body of a printed text helps to further the meaning of the text. Traditionally, the writer carefully selected, crafted, and cited such materials to fit into and become part of the text. Such information, which comes from outside the writer's own knowledge and experiences and is combined with the writer's text, is an accepted, and certainly a required, part of academic referential writing.

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