Dissertation Summary: Entanglements: Articulating Discourses & Practices of Web-based Teaching & Learning

Web-based teaching is becoming an increasingly common practice for computer composition instructors. Many instructors use the web to design and publish their own and their students’ works through whole class or personal home pages. Some instructors use the hypertext medium of the web for e-mail correspondence and chat space and MOO discussions. And some instructors encourage students to use the web for research as a means to access library sources or to locate other material for student essays. As web-based teaching practices become more accepted and integrated into our composition classrooms, computer compositionists must be attentive to the ways in which such practices begin to seem “normal.” James Berlin (1996) reminds us that we must struggle against that normalization. In fact, Berlin suggests that “the central task of teachers [is] to rethink theory through classroom practice and classroom practice through theory” (p. 112). For those of us teaching composition, being critical of technology means paying attention to our practices and discourses about teaching, learning, technology, and culture and continually questioning our roles in relationship to these practices and discourses. To be critical agents for change, I argue that we must be willing to interrogate and explore the contradictions and ambiguities of our teaching and learning with web-based pedagogical materials so that we can integrate the World Wide Web (WWW) into our classrooms for the betterment of our own and our students’ learning.

To begin this interrogation of web-based teaching, in my dissertation, I explore some of the ways in which WWW teaching and learning inform teachers’ and students’ classroom experiences. I use several data sources¹ to examine practices and discourses about teaching and learning with web-based materials. Through my research, I hope to provide insights into the role of teacher as critical agent of technology. I employ articulation theory as my methodology to interrogate the often contradictory discourses about the WWW, to critique those discourses, and to propose other possible, but less examined, ways of re-conceiving of teaching and learning on and about the web in the our writing classrooms. I believe that such an examination allows me to speak to other computer composition instructors who also are struggling with how to teach hypertext technology and media in both critical and productive ways. Most importantly, my exploration has a productive impulse—I offer possibilities for re-articulating web-based teaching and learning to account for the complexities of the relationships under investigation.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In chapter one, I argue that composition teachers and researchers interested in technology must study the ways in which the WWW affects our composition classrooms. My study allows us, as writing instructors and researchers, to understand and struggle against inequitable technological and pedagogical practices. Based upon a significant body of work in computers and composition and hypertext theory, I advocate that we draw upon what are termed “critical theories of technology” to enact more equitable technology use in our classrooms. Critical theories of technology state that technology is always developing in relationship to the human demands and concepts of technological use. As Andrew Feenberg (1991, 1995, 1999), Bruno Latour (1992), and Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert (1997) argue, technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term,

¹ sources: 1) three participant computer composition instructor’s web and hypertext teaching, 2) WebCT and other software application that target instructors, 3) my own computer composition teaching and mentoring experiences, and 4) relevant published research.
but an “ambivalent” process of development suspended among different positionalities. That is, technology is not outside of historical or material contexts—it has effects on and is affected by culture. Thus, we, as instructors, must strive for democratic instantiations of technology use in our classrooms.

In this chapter, I also acknowledge that while some computer compositionists work to reveal the power dynamics of technology in their classrooms and address the inequities in the application of certain technologies, research in computers and composition does not yet adequately address the role of the web and its effects as a resource available to us and our students. Because of the current need to understand the web and its potential influences on our teaching and learning environments, I suggest that we apply articulation theory to our current constructions of the WWW to achieve greater insight into possible starting points for continued research into critical computer composition teaching and the role(s) of the WWW. In chapters three and four of my dissertation, I apply articulation theory directly to the data of my dissertation study—my work with three participant computer composition instructors and the web-based application WebCT—to get at the narratives of the WWW and their potential affects on our classroom practices.

Chapter 2: Articulation Theory as Methodology for the Study of Computer Composition

In chapter two, I expand on the suggestion that to improve our computer composition teaching and learning, we must be able to understand the ways in which the WWW is situated in our cultural discourses and practices. I maintain that a critical methodology designed to meet these ends must be more than simply a method or set of techniques, but rather it must provide ways for us to theorize our roles as researchers and teachers and even our research processes in substantial ways.

Articulation theory has not often been discussed in terms of research agendas, particularly in the field of computers and composition, and thus, a major component of this chapter is to consider how the theory as defined and practiced by scholars across disciplines can be viewed in terms of more traditional research principles applied in our field. Articulation theory, as defined by Stuart Hall (1985, 1986), is the bringing together of specific, yet often disparate, cultural discourses and practices to make evident both the subordinate and dominant power positions represented by them. Through such an act, the scholar hopes to uncover suppressed ideas, narratives, and themes that could be asserted to combat the inequity of certain cultural practices. The productive impulse of articulation is termed “re-articulation.” In my own exploration of the WWW and its various cultural representations, I do not apply articulation theory prescriptively. Rather, I use articulation as a heuristic to interrogate the relationships of the WWW and our computer composition teaching.

While the goal of my project is to articulate our cultural discourses on the WWW in relationship to our classroom practices, I specifically devote this chapter to theorizing my methodology in hopes that it illuminates my later discussions in the more practical chapters of this work. Here, I define articulation’s elements, trace its methodological deployments by certain theorists, and illustrate the usefulness of articulation theory as a methodology in relationship to my data collection choices for this project.

Chapter 3: Teacher Research of Web-based Technologies in Computer Composition

In chapter three, I chronicle my teacher research. Employing articulation theory as a methodology, I outline the research that I conducted during the fall of 1999 with three first-year computer composition instructors who were new to teaching in computer classrooms and were enrolled in a semester-long computer composition mentoring group at Purdue University. In this chapter, I
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present an outline of my research path from recruitment of participants and their roles in the research process to data selection and interpretation. In addition to outlining each component of my research, I discuss the valuable contributions of the participants. With each participant, my research process includes two interviews (one at the beginning of the fall '99 semester and one at the end of the same semester); two observations of their classrooms; two technology-ranking exercises; and the collection of instructional materials from their classes. Other contributions to my research include informal conversations and e-mails that helped to refine the research process and contribute to my understanding and analysis of the instructors’ experiences when negotiating the technologies of their classrooms.

I begin the chapter with a review of computer composition scholarship that emphasizes certain expectations with respect to the “appropriate” uses of technology in our classrooms. Then, I present scholarship that attends directly to the role of the WWW in composition research. Keeping in mind these contributions to the constructions of technology and the WWW in composition, I outline my own research—describing the projects’ participants, my role as researcher, and the data selection, collection, and analysis. After briefly reviewing scholarship in critical theory of technology with respect to technological determinism, I examine the two dominant cultural narratives prevalent in my research: 1) perceiving the WWW as a global community and 2) equating of technological literacy with economic viability and success. While there are other cultural narratives at work in my research, these two re-occurring themes and the ways that they are disseminated in our culture allow me to examine some important assumptions circulating in our computer composition classrooms.

Chapter 4: Making Web-based Technology Easy & Transparent: The Case of WebCT

Here, I present a detailed analysis of the online authoring system, WebCT. This application, developed at the University of British Columbia, allows instructors to build web-based pedagogical materials such as syllabi, schedules, assignments, and other course resources. I begin with a review of computer composition scholarship that discusses the role of technological design and the ways in which design issues affect our implementation of technology (Johnson-Eilola, 1997a, 1997b, Johnson-Eilola and Selber, 1996, Selfe and Selfe, 1994). Then, employing articulation theory as a methodology, I analyze WebCT as a research case to discuss issues concerning the design and marketing of web-based authoring systems. I discuss the history and development of WebCT and trace its uses in the university setting. After discussing the history and structure of WebCT, I articulate the ways in which this computer application correlates with other on-line teacher resources that advocate making the web “easier” for instructors.

As composition instructors interested in technology, we must consider the promises of web-based pedagogical products and the ways that these products position us and our students. In my discussion on the specifics of WebCT as one such application, I outline the various subject positions that teachers and students are asked to “inhabit” in order to use such a web-based package. I examine two dominant cultural narratives prevalent in both the design and literature of this software: 1) technology, particularly web technology, is easy to use, and 2) the best technologies are those that present themselves as invisible. Other cultural narratives are at work in the design and description of these web-based applications, but these two themes and the ways that they circulate in our culture allow me to examine some important assumptions brought to bear upon our work in the composition classroom. In this chapter, I also examine the ways that other web-based pedagogical technologies are being designed, packaged, and sold to instructors. I present an analysis of the web sites for software applications being marketed directly to instructors—Blackboard.com and Macromedia CourseBuilder for Dreamweaver. Both of these applications, to differing degrees,
allow instructors to create web-based pedagogical materials for their courses without knowing much about the technological functions of the WWW. Despite their slight differences, I contend that the design of all of these software applications directly impacts the potential uses and roles of the web in our classrooms.

**Chapter 5: Hopes & Promises: Re-articulating the Roles of Web-based Technology for Computer Composition**

After my articulation of some of the possible narratives of web-based technologies in previous chapters, I turn my attention to re-articulating the role(s) of the WWW in our composition classrooms. By looking at the contradictions and gaps made evident by the articulations of the web, I draw upon the productive element of articulation theory to discuss ways of instantiating critical theories of technology. I argue for two initiatives to contextualize the WWW in relationship to critical pedagogy: 1) student interrogations into the role(s) of web-based technologies and 2) computer composition instructor training which focuses on critical uses of technology. Through historical investigations on web-based technologies, articulations of students’ own uses of web-based technologies, and whole class mappings of the WWW and its role in our culture, computer composition instructors committed to critical uses of the WWW can complicate the cultural narratives of the WWW and strive for more egalitarian web-based pedagogies. I also argue that using the web more critically can be achieved only if instructors are supported through web-based technology training and explorations of their own articulations of the uses of web-based technologies. In fighting against the decontextualized and reductive views of web-based teaching and learning—such as the WWW as a global community, technological expertise as economic viability, web authoring as easy, and invisible technologies as the best technologies—my hope is to make productive suggestions for the critical integration of web-based teaching and learning into our composition classrooms.