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2008 SWCA Conference

11 February 2008

**Destination Media Literacy:
Using Writing Center Influence as a Work in Progress to Combat New Media**

New Media is such a loaded term. Even with its many nuances, it is still not a new concept. This medium is a far cry for how content, and for that matter, accurate information can be interpreted. In the academic world, a battle wages with students and seasoned academics, where instructors shield traditional academic conventions from these new forms of media. However, students are becoming more accustomed and showing more comfort with manipulating and utilizing the medium whether for personal or professional purposes. This divide places writing center professionals in a quandary: how do we effectively aid students in evaluating, interpreting, and presenting online sources in a critical way? When a writing center professional glances at the work presented by undergraduates, specifically incoming freshmen, how and what sources they are attributing is definitely an issue worth looking closely. The emphasis of this paper focuses primarily on the capacity for students to remain critical, vigilant skeptics, ensuring that certain core values in research and criticism are upheld. These values transfer from the academy to the professional world, and the capacity for media literacy in a content-driven society will be very important, for the goal of academia is to provide foundations of critical thinking and evaluation, not complacency for mediocrity.

Before we can establish a premier focus on media literacy, a specific definition has to be crafted. Media literacy, much like the medium New Media, has many different modes and components. The media literacy that this argument emphasizes is the method for which individuals obtain information, and their capacity to provide a form of rational objectivity to

develop a critical interpretation, i.e. information literacy, which is one of the components to the overwhelming umbrella. Some sources, like Siho Nam, have articulated this term to mean, “the ability to communicate competently in all media forms, print and electronic, as well as to access, understand, analyze and evaluate the powerful images, words and sounds that make up our contemporary mass media culture” (3). Gaining the ability to communicate, and means to comprehend, through this myriad of media content is a crucial first step for students. The issues they face range from not just incorporating or accepting all forms of factual information without critical interpretation, but also the understanding of the author’s aim or purpose for creating content. A student’s awareness of various rhetorical strategies is the other imperative because these strategies further narrow the options a reader can consider when assimilating a document.

Readership and active skepticism of content has been a task that students have had to master for centuries in the academic realm. The issue with unlimited information has surfaced before numerous times in history. According to the Argentinean writer Jorge Borges, he devised the idea of a complete and ubiquitous library where the classics are outnumbered by the vastly incompetent works and the utter gibberish as early as the thirties, indicating that the reality of such an expansive depository for information was possible (214-6). And it is. His foresight would have served him well in the Internet age. Even though he never saw the reality of the Internet, he did perceive the infinite monkey theorem to jumpstart this writing problem. The theorem suggests that if given random opportunity during an infinitesimal amount of time, a monkey typing at a keyboard could actually produce a comparable Shakespearean masterpiece (Borges 215). Here is where the problem of media literacy must begin; it has to first focus on the issues that generate the biggest dilemma, and that dilemma is authorship and message.

Much of what classical interpretation renders in its writing only emphasizes the same issues that students face with content today, and understanding authorship and message with online content is difficult but crucial. Content providers can come in a wide range, from a seasoned academic publishing their research or projects to a student who finds solace in publishing their musings about what they learn in class. Authors write with the intent to develop a readership, a committed following of individuals, or a group, that follow their premises and share in their perspective of the world. However, in Barbara Warnick's article, "Rhetorical Criticism of Public Discourse On the Internet: Theoretical Implications," she focuses on calling to arms academics to become involved with the diverging influence that electronic environments have sparked: "The Internet, however, is, more than many other communication environments, one in which so many texts are being produced, consumed, duplicated, forwarded, and altered that the notion of a discrete audience for a discrete message has become quite problematic" (Warnick 77). In this case, students indirectly receive messages from the information they read. Text changes hands all the time without attribution, and without emphasizing dangers of using possibly plagiarized information, the student might find themselves in a serious dilemma. Since the intent of the message changes, these sorts of obstacles are what students face when they read pages that could have been written by a truly unknown author.

Students have to be able to break past the barrier of message and identify the author of their content. In some cases, the Internet does not provide an honest method for audiences to identify the author: "[T]he question of authorship is no more easily answered than the question of audience. Many web sites are posted by groups or individuals who do not choose to reveal their identities" (Warnick 79). The same concern applies to the author as to the message because without an upfront method to know who the author is of content, then there is no accountability,

and the academic integrity of information diminishes drastically; the first question or inquiry an instructor will have on a student's assignment is who is this author, and what substantial authority are they to provide this information. The Internet does not provide that kind of comfort or convenience. Students might not be aware of how the author may not present information in an appropriate tone or discourse, but at the same time, the information might just be placed online for the pure pleasure of trapping the incredulous, which can lead to scolding from the imminently aware.

The other major issue that students face is being able to understand content and context. These components divide the incredulously trapped and the imminently aware because it is the underlying factor that is not so omnipresent on these electronic media. Instructors would like to see students be able to competently interpret and analyze information to make functional use of their critical thinking skills. Arguably, the most important parts of an assignment are the actual content and context for which the information is presented. As many students, particularly English and Communication students realize, grammar makes up a portion of the overall written product; content and context have everything to do with how the message is presented and understood. Students are not usually aware of this problem and we help explain to them how to become more successful. But electronic media allows any author to publish their content, and the pivotal issue is how the content is presented, whether heavily biased or partisan. Students need to be well educated on the incorporation of such information to steer clear of other issues.

Looking at content more closely, take one of the new academic banes—Wikipedia. The mere utterance sends so many disaffected academic audiences in revolt, preferably moving in the opposite direction because its construction has become the proverbial forbidden fruit for academia. The medium acts as a free service to allow members to not only publish their

contributions for anyone to read as part of a collectively edited entry or entries, but its mere setup indicates a level of appropriateness to be cited as a credible source. The reality is from both a content and contextual perspective, Wikipedia breaks many sacred academic conventions. Any person, no matter if they are a professionally trained writer or a humdrum ex high school student, can provide information. The content written at one point may undergo several revisions, and even public figures like politicians might have their staffers publish an edited and acceptable version of their biography. Students for the most part know that Wikipedia is not an acceptable source, but that does not stop them from using it. At the same time, their acceptance of what they are reading as true even when parts or even sections are sorely misrepresented further skews the truth of what a person or theory might actually mean. This issue, while it seems benign, exemplifies the way these mediums further deride the truth from an audience that still might not realize the information they read is probably inaccurate.

As for the perspective of context, this component has just as much bearing on text as content. The context allows readers or an audience to understand the relationship or framework in which a specific theory or person fits in any given topic or issue. Students sometimes have a hard time seeing how context can play a role in not just their writing but also in how they present information. Sometimes they may assume that the reader knows more about a given topic, and those assumptions can lead to larger, more confusing results in their writing. Context has been a key issue according to the acerbic Andrew Keen who wrote a blistering book, “The Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet Is Killing Our Culture,” where he blasted the Internet for its open sourced capabilities (Keen). Applying his sharp analytical rebukes of the Internet to Wikipedia, readers can see how in Britney Spears’s Wikipedia entry, the epitome of popular culture, amassed over seventeen pages of text with carefully placed citation and documentation; on the

reverse, a revered figure of science such as Marie Curie, twice honored as a Nobel Laureate in Physics and Chemistry, receives just seven pages with three sources documented against Spears's staggering 157 notations ("Britney Spears"; "Marie Curie").

Wikipedia does not police which entries receive more attention than others, however they do take note of it in their disclaimers, but Marie Curie devoted her life to science and researching a powerful element that changed the way humans could channel energy. By pure assessment of recognition, it seems that Britney Spears has contributed more to society and to people. It is not about what is reality on the Internet but what appears that way. Students need to be made aware of the possibilities and understand why there are issues as opposed to just telling them how inappropriate the information is. This result is striking, but that example only previews countless other problems that can be seen in electronic media.

Writing center professionals, like instructors, have equal opportunity to make use of their resources and knowledge to help guide students in the right direction. Whether the assignment is a minor, short paper or a historiography that looks at a certain event, students need academic guidance, just as an upperclassman or intern in a specific profession—understanding the conventions works in a similar fashion. Combating all the issues that come with interpreting and interacting with New Media cannot be solved because these mediums will be the way in which communication and information is presented. Consultants and other professionals should consider providing ample advice not just in the concerns with addressing a paper, but also on how these same students are obtaining information from the Internet.

When students bring papers that have a multitude of sources that seem inappropriate for an academic paper, professionals must remain committed to explain the dangers of using such sources as well as provide constructive options to help them. One of the best examples is

students wanting to use definitions in their assignments. They love to define words or terms and use those words to help establish a poignant meaning or purpose in their papers. These assignments are quite common, and students seem compelled to use dictionary.com as an authoritative source. In these circumstances, instead of relaying to the student the problems that a source as incredible as the dictionary online can be, another more academically profitable option would be to suggest using the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. Academics know this source to be one of the best methods of finding out a word's meaning, and by far the most informative source on a word's origins and multiple meanings.

By explaining how the *OED* is a strong academic source, students can consider the benefit of learning the word and alternate meanings. If a student is reading a poem and comes across a word that they assume, in their contemporaneous perspective as defined in one way, much like a online dictionary will sometimes provide, that same student can see from the online version or actual volume of the *OED* that the same word has multiple meanings and over time might have changed or took on other meanings as well. The student can learn alternate definitions to gain a deeper or more insightful meaning of the poem and could possibly be able to put together an argument supporting their findings about not just the word but the work itself. Preferably, if the *OED* is available online, this option can help bridge the gap between print and electronic sources because students will have to become more competent of online sources.

Students can even benefit from the source Wikipedia to improve upon their research skills. Aside from the rhetorical conundrums and frustrations for accuracy that it might present, the entries in Wikipedia will provide some content for surface, general understanding of a subject much in the way an encyclopedia will provide, but at the same time most sources, not all, have citations or references to other sources at the foot of the page. At the end of some sentences,

links are available to follow that may lead to more reliable source information. This same practice is encouraged when students are doing in-depth research because some journal articles or books might lead to even better sources on a given subject. The goal in mind is to emphasize and demonstrate to the student how to connect using the Internet with a purpose of practicing good research habits when going about acquiring information. Wikipedia citations provide, at times, detailed information about the author, date, publication information, and even an external link to the actual document if the information is available online. While Wikipedia as a source is not viable, using it to help bolster more sources or acquire more academically appropriate data increases a student's success at mastering those skills.

Aside from using information consortiums, writing center professionals should emphasize the use of databases to find academic and scientific journal articles for their papers or research. Whether their papers are short analyses or long, involved theses, students should consider an earlier stage of academic development to become familiar with their desired discipline's academic literature and credentials. For example, if political science majors have goals to become lawyers and attend law school, then these students should begin reading legal papers found typically in the *Harvard Law Review* and *Yale Law Journal*; further, these students should become familiar with the Supreme Court decisions that Cornell Law School has made available (*Harvard Law Review*; *Yale Law Journal*; "Supreme Court Collection"). These resources will allow students to see the benefit of learning earlier about their disciplines of choice and plan more effectively how they want to secure their goals. The reality is that students do not realize sometimes the intense reading and writing requirements needed in order to be success in law school and a legal career. By becoming more familiar with this material, students

will benefit in the long run and see that there are more resources, like these websites and journal databases that will expose them to their desired career goals.

Another profitable option for professionals is to ask the student about their topic and find out if there are possibly any specific professional websites that will provide information for their paper. If we expand the political science major example a little further, the student might want to acquire more information on a subject by looking at think tanks, political associations, or non-governmental organizations that offer plenty of useful information and analyses for the student's paper. These strategies are the methods that help combat the abundance of New Media content, finding ways to filter through the gibberish is a strong skill for writing center professionals to encourage. By the professional demonstrating that the Internet has tangible information and how to obtain that information, students can repeat this process on their own and become more comfortable with searching for specific information on the Internet, and there would be less of a possibility of accepting inappropriate and inaccurate content.

Being able to use New Media does not have to mean that students cannot learn how to make the most of these resources. New technological advances are a serious and unmistakable reality, and the academic realm has to contend with this reality appropriately with a degree of irony, at times, and also with a little ingenuity to bridge the gap between technology and the traditional conventions for research and critical thinking. As Mira Feuerstein indicated in her article, "Media Literacy in Support of Critical Thinking," educators and facilitators are now leading the charge to steer students in the right direction, securing a more worthwhile experience in developing judicious, critical thinking skills: "[There is] an unparalleled effort by educators to establish methods and teaching strategies specifically geared to cultivate thinking skills... [and the] development of thinking skills would equip future generations to generate new ideas, and

give them the basis to provide reasoning for, and explanations of, events taking place in daily life” (Feuerstein 44). The end goal for students is not success on an assignment but their overall development of reasoning and interpretation for the future. Remember, students all begin at the same place—some might have a stronger understanding about what are good research habits, but as writing center professionals we are exposed to these methods and resources daily.

Emphasizing to students the power they hold when writing a paper will help to show that they are part of the bigger and larger picture that is academia: the ability to provide fruitful and valuable discourse on information that, in each person’s own critical perspective, adds to the diversity and austere of obtaining higher education.

Students cannot change unsuccessful habits without a little bit of encouragement and explanation. These sessions—these tutorials—offer a chance for students to learn more about their ability to write and compose information in a clear and organized fashion. While they are not necessarily writing the next *Ulysses* or *The Wasteland*, students are still trying to learn the appropriate and correct formats because in each discipline and in each field, clarity and format are at the core for providing crucial data. Also, professionals have to keep in mind the benefit of assisting these students to learn how to develop a clarity of the language they plan to use in the professional world, and the sooner we push forward to transition the Internet and other media into our tutorials, only when necessary, the more prepared students will be when they begin their careers. So many different facets of New Media exists, but if we can take the time to demonstrate some of the negative and positive ways in which students can use the Internet to increase validity, credibility, and critical interpretation of information, their literacy of these mediums will improve as they start foraging through a wide array of content to provide more insightful, truly inspiring knowledge.

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