Acting On or Acting With: Academe's Promotion of Exclusionary Participation in the Virtual Sphere

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Article:
Scenario 1:

Professor A promotes teaching with technology to all of his colleagues, using his own course as an example of how instructional technology provides flexibility for his students, immediate feedback on their learning, and less work for him. For his undergraduate sociology course, which averages about 80 students a section, he has included instructional software for testing. During the semester, Professor A's students take three multiple-choice tests online, on- or off-campus, within a specified twenty-four hour period. After students log on, they have 70 minutes to complete and submit a 100-question multiple-choice test before it automatically corrects. The comprehensive final exam is taken in scheduled campus computer labs with monitors, where from his question pool of 1000, the software randomly selects 150 questions for each student. No student has the exact same questions in the exact same order, and the students know their final exam scores within minutes after completing the exam.

Scenario 2:

Because of pressure from her institution to "teach with technology," Instructor B decided to try a listserv for her British literature survey. She got help from the Instructional Technology Specialist to set up the list and had him come to a special class scheduled in a computer lab to get all of her students subscribed. For 10% of the semester's course grade, each student was required to post a 100-or-more-word statement about the readings for the week. She had been told by others, who regularly used listservs and other forms of threaded discussions, how electronic discourse enhanced the students' learning and extended the class discussions. By the end of the semester, she was extremely dissatisfied with the listserv-many students had posted their statements, but they did not relate them to class discussion or to other students' postings; some students had merely written responses extending the literature to personal experiences in their lives, while some did not even bother to do the assignment. (Read David Elias and Deborah Brown's "Critical Discourse in a Student Listserv.")

Scenario 3:

Newly hired Assistant Professor C in the School of Education decided to take advantage of the university's workshops on course website design. Over a period of four months, he had created a series of visually pleasing web pages for one of his upper division courses. Course policies, readings, schedule, assignments, test dates were all available online for his students. Moreover, he had incorporated pages on his professional career and scholarship and on himself, including a photo of him and his dog. Because he wanted to offer more instructional support for the students in his site, he had a page of live links to Internet sites that pertained to topics he planned to cover in class. As the culminating act in his course, he required all his students to provide him with their papers in print and on disk, which he electronically published on his site. In his annual report at the end of his first year, the assistant professor recorded the time and energy he had put in to this successful approach to teaching with technology. (At Rutgers Writing Program, click on Sample Syllabus Using Technology, Part Two).

Scenario 4:
In a course segment on literacy, Teaching Assistant D asks students to burn a CD or to generate web pages that demonstrate their multiple literacies. One student develops a literacy portfolio on CD with videoclips of her performing her poetry, with files containing images of her paintings and excerpts from her journals and short stories, and a text introduction that explores the relevance of these artifacts to her background in the arts. Another student offers a hypertext with an introductory statement and images outlining and linking to the connections between his types of communication and his literacies, including various print, oral, and visual examples. Across the next week, students experience each other's electronic texts and discuss them via a class listserv, analyzing the various means of presentation, investigating the ways electronic representation enhances their understanding of each other, and critiquing how the tools used and the assignment's contexts limited, contained, and shaped that representation for both creator and viewer. (Read Douglas Eyman's "Hypertext in the Computer-Facilitated Writing Class.")

The scenarios above illustrate the kinds of computer-aided instruction that I have witnessed across my campus over the last year. Each scenario highlights the benefits and limitations such teaching with technology holds for our students. The first three scenarios demonstrate distinct ways that technology is incorporated in courses: Professor A substitutes one testing technology for another; Instructor B adds a listserv without purpose or integration; and Assistant Professor C, through his informational website and his posting of the students' papers, forces the display of print literacy in an electronic venue.

These three teaching scenarios underscore a dominant tendency in computer-aided instruction: all three teachers employ technology in ways that act on their students. These approaches highlight limited student participation because they do not invite, but instead require, students to interact with technology. Such approaches fail to enhance and heighten student learning. This "acting on" use of technology is not surprising given that more and more university mission statements are stressing the importance of exposure to and learning in new media and technologies. However, this "acting on" approach emphasizes how instructional technology merely supports conventional instruction and learning practices. Such peripheral incorporation of technology through class listservs, email with the instructor, or a component of Internet research for a paper limits virtual technology to the roles of glorified television, telephone, and typewriter. Student participation becomes a matter of information gathering, classroom communication, and word-processing. Universities are missing what Cynthia Selfe in *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention* describes as the real issue of integrating technology in instruction: the need for both teachers and students "to use technology, or relate to it in ways that are productive and meaningful" (144). Because participation in the virtual sphere, comprised of computer-based information and communication environments, requires both technical skills to negotiate the virtual sphere and critical awareness about the reception and composition of the on-screen play among image, text, and sound, computer-aided instruction is more complex and demanding than many faculty and administrators recognize.

Rather than the partial or exclusionary participation fostered by "acting on" approaches to teaching with technology, what is needed is a shift in pedagogy and perspective that fosters approaches to technology that act with students. "Acting with" requires that teachers provide opportunities for students to create various print, oral, and visual virtual texts that exhibit a range of literacies and learning, for them to make choices about the technological tools used, and for them to critique the tools, discourses, information, and practices that incorporate the virtual sphere. The following two ways highlight an "acting with" model of teaching with technology:

1. Teachers who teach in electronic classrooms should prepare students to choose their means of participation in the virtual sphere as well as draw attention to the changing literacies of that sphere, and

2. Teachers who teach in electronic classrooms should reaffirm the democratizing aspect of the virtual sphere by addressing the "acting on" problem with their university colleagues through their work with cross-disciplinary teaching projects, symposia, and technology policy and procurement committees.

First, "acting with" engages students in an awareness of, choices about, and critical responses to various forms of electronic discourse and participation in the virtual sphere. Most of us in rhetoric and composition already ask our students to learn in these ways, but I also ask my students to critique my assignments and goals each semester as another means of exploring their own participation. At Stanford, Shirley Brice Heath and Andrea Lunsford are piloting a first-year course that focuses equally on oral, print, and visual skills. Performance of these skills, of course, can be captured and created through technological means. Their proposed second-year course, titled *Electric Rhetoric*, acknowledges Kathleen Welch's work, a rereading of Isocrates in order to address the challenges posed to literacy by the burgeoning communication technologies. (At Stanford's Fundamental Aspects of PWR Syllabus, see Required Assignment Sequence for Writing 2 or Writing 3.) "Acting with" advocates for a more systematic and critical integration of the pedagogies and curriculums that enable a purposeful use of technology. The fourth scenario described above illustrates the kind of environment through which students may begin to understand the range and kinds of public participation, multiple literacies, and discourse communities possible in the virtual sphere. Teaching Assistant D's assignment asks students to define multiple literacies on their own terms and produce a multimedia product that results from individual decisions about static or moving images, word texts, and sound. It offers students a choice for publication between the more public posting of web pages or the more controlled class viewership of a CD. Not only are the students invited to share their literacy products and reflect on them, but they are also urged to critique technology. These three components – using technical skills to create meaning through both content and form, making choices concerning the technologies used, and analyzing the processes, products, and tools – demonstrate students "acting with" the technology for purposeful learning.

Second, "acting with" requires us to move beyond our students and our classrooms, engaging with other faculty, disciplines, schools, and communities. For the last twenty years, rhetoric and composition has actively investigated this "acting with" principle, an agenda that makes rhet/comp specialists appropriate leaders in addressing this "acting on" problem. We have the richness and diversity of research, experimentation, pedagogy, and theory to share with other disciplines. For instance, the Heath-Lunsford model works bi-directionally as curriculum reform affects both students and institution. Selfe's *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century* offers nine means of making inroads to such change. Whether we approach purposeful student participation through the term "literacy" as Selfe does or through the term "rhetoric" as Heath and Lunsford do, we must participate in our institutions beyond our electronic classrooms. Besides working with the administrative technology committees on policy and procurement, we can establish or build on technology and literacy initiatives with support from grant money. We can participate in cross-curricular programs to promote change. If our schools do not have Electronic Communications across the Curriculum programs (ECAC), we can work through the combined writing and speaking across the curriculum programs (WAC + SAC) that are currently being developed at many institutions. But most importantly, how we generate change in our institutions and what we do in our classrooms operate reciprocally. We must initiate and maintain conversations with our university colleagues that help all of us shift our pedagogical practices from "acting on" toward "acting with."

It is not what type of instructional technology used but how it is used that enables purposeful student participation. An "acting with" pedagogy offers multiple means of learning, student choices, and student critique. How might the above three "acting on" scenarios be rewritten to reflect an "acting with" pedagogy? In scenario 1, Professor A uses the technology for multiple-choice questions instead of using instructional software to assess students. He might enhance its use by having students analyze their physical and intellectual online test-taking processes, examine the time and space parameters of the exam, and discuss the availability and fallibility of technology for exams. He might have students write multiple-choice questions over specific chapters and lectures, submitting them for their exams. They would be learning about question formation, valued knowledge, relatedness of concepts to processes, and the knowledge parameters of multiple-choice questions. By asking students to take different types of online exams and to compare their individual performances, Professor A would be providing a virtual environment exhibiting a range of learning and inviting critique of the technology.

Scenario 2 illustrates what happens when a teacher incorporates asynchronous electronic discussions without providing assignment guidelines, thinking through the assignment's purpose, or relating those electronic conversations to the class discussions. Instructor B might benefit from an informal conversation with a teacher who uses electronic discussions regularly, where a conversation of shared disaster stories could lead to a productive dialogue about helping students make the connections between the class content and the online analysis. Instructor B might also benefit from the faculty listserv on teaching with technology. For the following semester, Assistant Professor C in scenario 3 might redesign his paper assignment, which does nothing more than display student writing and invite plagiarism of their work from other students, by asking students to design and present their papers specifically for online reading. In this way, the assignment requires discussions of the differences between virtual texts and print ones, allowing for more literacy decisions over image and word. Like scenario 4, these texts could be shared and discussed, examining the relationships of content to form.

As Selfe argues "By paying attention to the unfamiliar subject of technology – in sustained and critical ways, and from our own perspectives as humanists – we learn some important lessons about how to go about making change in literacy instruction" (134). Because I am "paying attention," I must take action, but not on my own. "Acting with" means that I must work with the technology and my students, enabling them to better critically act with electronic and virtual technologies. I also must act with my colleagues across disciplines and departments, helping them realize the potential of their students engaged with the virtual sphere.

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