

# PRINT/NEW MEDIA TRANSFER: GENRE ISSUES

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The obituary for the popular essayist, Nora Ephron, refers to a recollection that is relevant to the issue addressed in this essay: the degree to which students can *transfer* their understanding of academic print genres to the emerging multimodal genres that increasingly are being included in first-year writing courses. The obituary referred to Ephron as a “new journalist,” defined as someone who employed novelistic techniques as a means of arriving at a higher truth, and apparently, Ephron acknowledged that she may indeed have used these techniques. Nevertheless, she emphatically denied the label. “I am not a new journalist, whatever that is,” she once wrote. “I just sit here at the typewriter and bang away at the old forms (McGrath).

Ephron’s dismissive response suggests that “banging away at the old forms” will generate significant change, perhaps unintentionally, and potentially contribute to the development of new genres. But in the context of including new media in our writing courses, can we assume that students who can produce a thoughtful, well-organized, and coherent academic print text will be able to produce a thoughtful, well-organized, and coherent academic “text” that incorporates new media? Or are print academic genres so substantively different from new media academic genres that seamless transfer between the two will be impossible—at least initially? New technologies can sometimes be used simply to “replicate longstanding literacy practices” (Knobel and Lankshear 7), as was often the case in the early days of word processing when writers used computers pretty much as typewriters, first writing out a draft in long hand and then simply transferring that draft to the computer. However, it is more likely that new literacies and new academic genres will be characterized

by “very different kinds of values and priorities and sensibilities than the literacies we are familiar with” (7). As William Constanzo points out, “It is not simply that the tools of literacy have changed; the nature of texts, of language, of literacy itself is undergoing crucial transformations” (11).

In the context of these issues, this essay will discuss a project implemented in five first-year writing classes that focused on helping students acquire rhetorical knowledge and genre awareness. It will then question whether students’ understanding of rhetoric and genre as it pertains to print texts can be applied or “transferred” to texts that incorporate new media. In particular, the essay will focus on the issue of *coherence*, a concept Betty Bamberg observed in 1983 “is generally accepted as a sine qua non in written discourse” (417) and remains relevant, as evidenced in the number of writing textbooks that address the topic. But can we presume that students who are able to write a coherent academic print essay will easily be able to transfer their concept of coherence to multimodal academic essays?

## **The Genre Awareness Project**

### **Fostering Metacognitive Insight**

The genre awareness research project was based on the following assumptions: that students will be able to write more effectively in their composition courses and acquire the tools they need to address new academic writing situations if 1) they understand the rhetorical and social purposes of academic writing, 2) they acquire a vocabulary that enables them to discuss writing, rhetoric, and genre in multiple contexts, and 3) they are encouraged to abstract principles from one rhetorical situation and apply them to another. The idea behind the project was that such metacognitive insight can serve as a *gateway* to continued writing development, enabling students to make connections between the type of writing frequently assigned in the composition course—that is, academic argument—and other writing genres. To achieve this goal, the project developers created a curriculum aimed at

helping students understand rhetorical concepts associated with the genre of academic argument and familiarizing them with rhetorical terms such as *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, *exigence*, *rhetoric*, *rhetorical situation*, *audience*, and *counterargument*. An important goal of the project was to enable students to grapple with these concepts and to develop a vocabulary they could use to talk about writing, the idea being that having the *language* to talk about a subject can generate recollection and facilitate understanding (Susan Jarratt's concept of pedagogical memory pertains here).<sup>1</sup> An additional goal was to help students gain "genre awareness," a term that several genre scholars have embraced. Anne Beaufort, for example, advocates the importance of "genre knowledge as one of the domains or mental schema that writers invoke as they analyze new writing tasks in new contexts—a domain that can bridge rhetorical and social knowledge" and argues that "talking about genres can facilitate students' meta-cognitive reflection" (188). Amy J. Devitt also calls for helping students acquire genre awareness, defined as "a critical consciousness of both rhetorical purposes and ideological effects of genre forms" (192). Devitt argues that the concept of genre awareness can benefit students not only in first-year writing classes but also in other classes in other disciplines. Anis Bawarshi, Christiane Donahue, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi, and Irene Clark and Andrea Hernandez, among others, similarly discuss the role of genre awareness, which is associated with metacognitive awareness—defined by Linda Adler-Kassner, John Majewski and Damian Koshnick as occurring when students "not only know what they know, but they are also more likely to recognize how they know it" (2). However, discussions of genre or metacognitive awareness have focused primarily on print genres, not on potential transfer from print to new media.

### **Student Participants**

Students who participated in the project were all enrolled in first-year writing courses at a large public university where many are the first in their families to attend a post-secondary institution.

The university recognizes that a number of these students do not speak English as their first language; however, most have graduated from American high schools and can speak English fluently. In terms of their placement into writing courses, students are assigned on the basis of an entrance exam, and of the five classes involved in this study, the one I taught was in the highest range; the other four were in the middle.

### **Defining Genre in a Rhetorical Context**

The concept of genre, as it functions in a rhetorical context, has received considerable scholarly attention over the past thirty years, particularly in linguistics, where it is associated with discourse analysis (Swales, Bhatia, among others) and increasingly, in the field of rhetoric and composition. As has been noted by a number of genre scholars (Bawarshi and Reiff; Devitt; Miller, Nowacek), at one time, the concept of “genre” referred primarily to works of literature, such as a poem, a novel, or a detective story, and was usually associated with the *form* that characterizes a particular text category. The current perspective, however, focuses on the role of genre outside of literary study to refer to a variety of texts, some of them academic, some used functionally in everyday life, and it now views genres as complex social actions that include cultural knowledge. In this view, the form of a genre comes into being because it fulfills a particular and *recurring social function* (Bawarshi; Clark; Devitt; Miller, Reiff and Bawarshi; among others). Moreover, this view recognizes the connection between genre and discourse communities, acknowledging that familiarity with particular genres constitutes a mark of membership or “belonging” and that knowledge of privileged genres can contribute to educational and professional success. In fact, one of the rationales for the genre awareness project was that genre insight could maximize students’ possibilities for academic and professional advancement.

### **Genre Awareness Versus Explicit Teaching**

“Genre awareness,” however, does not mean the “explicit teaching” of a particular genre. Explicit teaching, the value of which has generated significant debate in genre scholarship (see Freedman, Williams), refers to teaching students to write in a particular genre, and often the approach is formulaic—a sort of “do it like this,” imitative approach. Imitation can be a useful strategy for learning to write in a new genre, but genre *awareness* involves a deeper, broader, and potentially more applicable set of understandings. When students acquire genre awareness, they are not simply learning how to write in a particular genre, although they may wish to do so in order to complete an assignment. In acquiring genre awareness, students gain insight into how a given genre fulfills a rhetorical purpose and how the various components of a text, the writer, the intended reader, the context, and the text itself, are informed by purpose. Through explicit teaching of a particular genre, students may be able to create a text that imitates its form and style, and sometimes, imitation can contribute to understanding. But without genre awareness, they will not comprehend how the text “works” to fulfill its purpose, and when they encounter a new genre, they may lack the insight to be able to transfer what they have learned.

### **Antecedent Genres and Prior Knowledge**

During the last decade, composition scholars have focused attention on what prior knowledge students bring with them from high school and how post-secondary writing instruction can build on such knowledge (Reiff and Bawarshi; Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi). Students entering the university have had considerable experience with various high school text genres, such as five-paragraph essays, book reports, research papers, literary analyses, and it is important for both teachers and students to understand how these “antecedent” genres are likely to help or hinder students from engaging successfully with unfamiliar academic genres. As Carolyn R. Miller notes,

Our stock of knowledge is useful only in so far as it can be brought to bear upon new experience: the new is made familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities: those similarities become constituted as a type. (29).

The effects of prior knowledge on new learning is an important topic in cognitive research concerned with learning (Marzano, Tobias), in scholarship addressing the topic of transfer (Ford, Perkins and Salomon; Tuomi-Gröhn and Engestrom; Robertson, Taczac, and Yancey), and recently in research that focuses on writing (Bawarshi and Reiff; Rounsaville, Goldberg, Wardle). In her 2004 book, *Writing Genres*, Amy J. Devitt affirms what our everyday experience tells us is true—that “people use familiar genres to act within new situations . . . and existing genres serve as powerful antecedents in shaping newly emerging genres” (204). The concept of antecedent genres is crucial to helping students acquire genre awareness in that some previously learned genres contribute easily to transfer, while others might interfere. For example, at the beginning of the semester, most students in my class understood the importance of developing some form of thesis, main point, or argument in their essays, thereby “transferring” what they had learned about an essay from high school to college writing. However, some of them were fixated on the ubiquitous five-paragraph essay, unaware that college “argument” usually addresses issues that require a deeper and more nuanced analysis. In this instance, then, one might say that the antecedent “five-paragraph” model, did not transfer appropriately.

### **Genre Awareness and the Issue of Transfer: Ball Handling On Low and High Roads**

Transfer from one literacy context to another is now recognized as complex, dynamic and difficult to prove. Although the goal of most first-year college writing courses is to enable students to develop as writers so that they can complete writing tasks in multiple contexts, a persistent curricular issue concerns

which genres are most likely to foster that goal. In many writing programs, including ours, the first-year composition course focuses on helping students learn to write a thesis-driven academic argument because it is believed that writing in most disciplines involves some form of reasoned argument (Graff refers to it as “arguespeak”). Nevertheless, we don’t really know whether the insights gained in first-year writing courses will enable students to apply or *transfer* what they learn to the writing assigned in other classes. This issue of *transfer*, as it pertains to writing, has become of significant scholarly concern, as evidenced in the Fall 2012 special issue of *Composition Forum* (Volume 26), which focuses entirely on this issue.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars maintain that although difficult to prove, “transfer” can happen (Beaufort; Clark and Hernandez; Dean; Devitt; Nowacek); others question whether it is even possible (Freedman; Wardle).

One of the most intriguing arguments against the possibility of transfer was made by David Russell, and David Russell and Arturo Yanez, who maintain that the writing taught in a first-year writing class is similar to a “hypothetical course in general ball handling” (cited in Nowacek 13). Russell asks readers to imagine a course that teaches students to play several games involving balls, such as football and baseball, and questions whether such a course would then enable students to do well at games such as tennis or ping-pong. Certainly, one has to agree, such transfer is unlikely to be automatic, and, in fact, as Rebecca S. Nowacek points out, a student who is an excellent batter might initially grip a tennis racket with two hands and hit the ball so powerfully that it goes out of bounds—an instance of what can be viewed as “negative” transfer.

Nevertheless, one might argue that although this hypothetical baseball player might not automatically become a skilled tennis player, he or she could use knowledge obtained from playing baseball to figure out what needs to be done on the tennis court—that is, if the student had a metacognitive awareness of similarities and differences in handling the ball in each sport. Moreover, it is also possible that the sense of accomplishment or sport-oriented

*identity* that the student might develop through playing baseball, might provide him or her with the confidence to approach a new sport, such as tennis. My perspective on the issue of ball handling in its connection to genre and transfer is that a student who has a deep understanding of how to handle a ball in playing baseball will be able to apply at least some aspects of his or her knowledge to the new sport. Certainly, he or she would probably be more successful in learning it than a student who had never handled a ball at all.

Another useful perspective on the issue of transfer is the distinction made in the more general context of *learning* transfer, most notably by David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, who discuss the distinction between low-road and high-road transfer. Low-road transfer, as they define it, is largely automatic, occurring between two very similar contexts or tasks, as in the example they use of learning to drive a car and then getting behind the wheel of a small truck. Perkins and Salomon note that “the new context almost automatically activates the patterns of behavior that suit the old one” (25)—the role of the steering wheel, the brake and gas pedals, for example. In contrast, high-road transfer connects dissimilar contexts and requires “deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application in another” (Perkins and Salomon 25). They cite the example of a person new to politics who might use his or her prior understanding of chess to gain political control.

### **Genre Awareness as a Threshold Concept**

Another learning theory that is pertinent to the project is that genre awareness can be viewed as a “threshold” concept, a term that refers to concepts deemed central to the mastery of a particular subject, “without which the learner cannot progress” (Meyer and Land 1). A threshold concept has been discussed in terms of “passing through a portal” or “conceptual gateway” that opens up “previously inaccessible ways of thinking about something” (Meyers and Land 9). In her definition of “threshold concepts,” Glynis Cousin notes several characteristics:



- that a threshold concept is “transformative in that it generates a profound “shift in the learner;”
- that a threshold concept is irreversible, because “once understood the learner is unlikely to forget it;”
- that a threshold concept is integrative, enabling the learner to make connections that were previously hidden; and
- that a threshold concept is likely to be “troublesome” in that it may appear to be counterintuitive or alien. (qtd in Perkins and Salomon, 1999, 2, 7)

Associated with this quality of “troublesomeness” is that of “liminality,” a state of instability in which “the learner may oscillate between old and emergent understandings, just as adolescents often move between adult-like and child-like responses to their transitional status” (Cousin 3). Cousin describes this state as characteristic of all new learning, or, as “now he had got it, now he hasn’t,” suggesting that transfer is a recursive, rather than a sequential or linear process.

In “The Value of Troublesome Knowledge: Transfer and Threshold Concepts in Writing and History,” Linda Adler-Kassner, John Majewski, and Damian Koshnick identify several ideas that might be considered “threshold” for student learning in composition. These include “the idea that all writing is situated within genre,” that “genre itself constitutes a form of social action” and that writing is not just “words on a page” but constitutes an important factor in enabling people to gain entry and membership in communities of discourse (qtd. in Adler-Kassner et al. 3). This notion of “threshold” concepts thus suggests the value of helping composition students acquire genre awareness. In terms of its transformative potential, genre awareness can change the way in which a student understands writing and can be “troublesome” because it may be different from their previous ideas—that excellence in writing meant grammatical correctness, or that there was “good” and “bad” writing, irrespective of discipline or

context. The term “liminality” too, defined by Jean H. F. Meyer, Ray Land, and Caroline Bailie as “a suspended state of partial understanding, or ‘stuck place’” (x), also pertains to novice writers’ limited understanding of the concept of genre, often manifested in mechanical and inappropriate imitation. These features of a threshold concept, in particular, transformativity, troublesomeness, and liminality, informed some of the insights that students participating in our pilot study reported at the end of the semester, specifically in their reflective comments.

### **Genre Awareness and New Media**

The focus of the project, then, was on helping students gain familiarity with rhetorical concepts as a means of acquiring genre awareness, the goal being to help students write academic argument, gain insight into what that genre involved, and potentially, apply that insight to other academic writing tasks. However, what complicated the study was that in Fall 2011, a new requirement was introduced into the first-year writing curriculum—an end-of-semester group “project” that incorporated new media. In my own class, the final project involved students working in groups to develop a blog that expanded the ideas they had argued in their third essays and that incorporated hyperlinks and visual elements. This change in the curriculum parallels similar new directions in other writing programs, many of which are moving toward the promotion of multimodal literacies (Kress 2003). As affirmed by Kathleen Blake Yancey in “Made Not Only In Words: Composition in a New Key,” multiple literacies already play a significant role in the twenty-first century, and it is therefore imperative for writing programs to address how texts “move across contexts, between media, across time” (312). In the context of our project, this new direction was embraced as a means of linking academic argument with a new media based component. However, it also raised the issue of how the incorporation of new media elements would impact students’ essays. Would students use multimedia elements to deepen their arguments? Would students be able to “transfer”

their understanding of academic argument as it is manifested in print text to academic argument that incorporates new media? And, a more complex question—is academic argument that includes new media a different genre than a print based academic essay, or just the same genre with some elements added to it?

## **The Results of the Project**

### **Surveys, Print Essays, and Reflections**

The genre awareness project involved approximately 100 students enrolled in five first-year writing classes, taught by four instructors, including myself, and the section I taught was comprised of students who had received the highest scores on the English Placement Test. Instructors emphasized concepts associated with genre and rhetoric, and students wrote three traditional argument essays, each including multiple drafts. In my own class, the last essay was concerned with debatable issues associated with the topic of new media, and students wrote traditional essays on this topic, some examples being the impact of Facebook on friendship, whether the Internet contributes to attention deficit, or the potential cognitive and physical effects of gaming. During the last several weeks of the semester, students in my class were assigned to groups according to the topics they had chosen and worked collaboratively to create a blog that included new media based material. These included hypertext elements, YouTube clips, pictures, and other visual features that were intended to enhance their arguments. Students indicated that they were pleased to incorporate new media into their work and said they were familiar with various blogging programs such as Tumblr, Blogger, or Wordpress. Everyone seemed to enjoy the group work. Students brought laptops to class, enabling them to work together easily, and the energy in the room was high. The lively buzz of conversation indicated that students liked working in new media and enjoyed the collaboration.

At the end of the semester, students completed surveys concerned with how useful they had found the genre awareness

based curriculum, and they also wrote reflective essays in which they elaborated upon the ideas addressed in the survey. Both the surveys and the reflections were anonymous.

### Results of the Surveys

Surveys distributed at the end of the semester suggest that the majority of students found the terms associated with rhetoric useful or very useful (*rhetoric, rhetorical situation, audience, thesis, logos, ethos, pathos, genre* and *counterargument*) and that their understanding of the genre of academic argument had been useful to them both in their writing classes and in other classes as well. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.

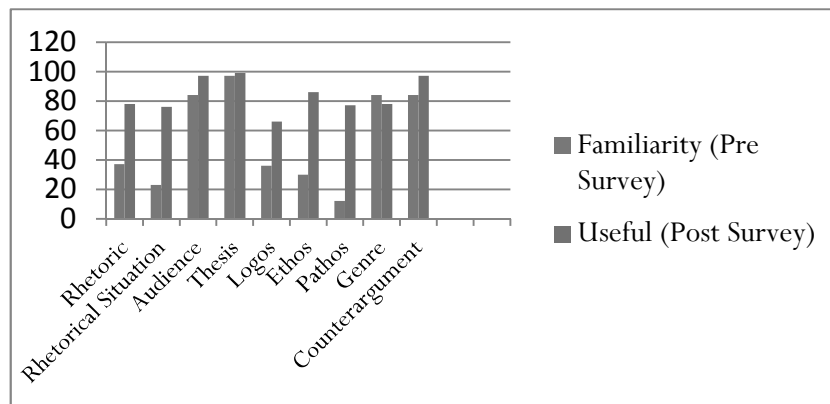


Figure 1: Familiarity Versus Usefulness—By Percentages N=100

Students found all of the rhetorical concepts useful or extremely useful. Even those terms which students said had not been very familiar to them at the beginning of the semester, such as *logos, ethos, and pathos*, had apparently proven “useful” to them in their writing at the end of the semester, the most notable example being the “rhetorical situation.”

Question #3 of the survey distributed at the end of the semester asked students to evaluate the usefulness of academic writing in the writing assigned in other university classes. The responses indicate, or shown in Figure 2, that 78% of the students

found it useful or very useful, that 19% found it “somewhat useful” and that only 2% did not find it useful at all.

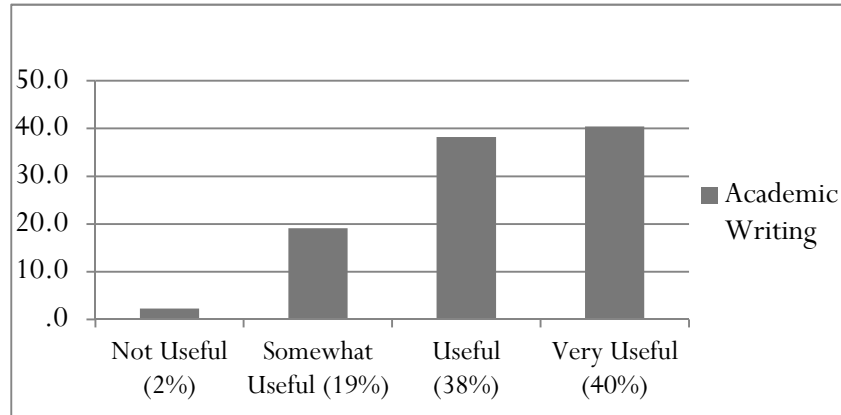


Figure 2: How Useful was Academic Writing? In Percentages. N=89.

### The Reflections

Paralleling the responses to the survey, the reflections affirm that students had found the genre awareness curriculum useful for them. Below are a few excerpts selected from all classes participating in the project:

*1. I learned that when writing on a topic, we must ask ourselves if there is a previous conversation about the topic and if we have an idea worth considering about the topic. Now when I start to write a paper, I think about what is being said by others about the issue, and then I ask myself about how I feel about the it. Then I can create my thesis. Once I have my thesis, I start to think about how to establish credibility (ethos), use some emotion (pathos), state some information about the subject (logos), and address the counter arguments.*

*2. Coming into this class, I wasn't sure if it was okay to fully state my opinion on something. But now as I am leaving, I understand that having a position is what makes a good essay and that it is important to support it with ideas and facts.*

3. *I have learned the importance of establishing credibility as a writer and of providing the reader with a bulletproof thesis.*

4. *The experience of writing these essays has prepared me for my future classes because I was challenged to explain the exigency and clearly state why my thoughts matter. In responding to the prompts, I found the most helpful method was to ask myself questions about my audience to develop my essay into a clear, persuasive thought. Would the sentence I just wrote convince my reader? Does the quote I just used support my claim? How would my audience react to this thought?*

5. *As the semester went on, I learned new terms, such as ethos, pathos, logos, rhetoric, and argument, just to name a few. These new terms did indeed help me become a better writer because I learned how to find credible sources which are relevant to the writing task at hand. I also learned how to construct a better thesis statement that would improve the overall quality of my essays.*

6. *Rhetoric, Ethos, logos, and pathos will hopefully all stay with me and be a part of my writing strategy as I make my journey through my years in school.*

7. *I learned to take into account the exigence, the overall problem, and who should care.*

Finally—

8. *I never knew how to establish an exigence in an essay because I did not even know what an exigence was.*

### **The Essays**

The positive self-reports on both the surveys and the reflections from all five classes were affirmed by the quality of the print essays written in my own class in fulfillment of the third

assignment. My class consisted of students who had scored in the highest range on the entrance exam, and all of their essays, which were posted on their blogs as part of the final project, were satisfactory—some of them excellent. I was pleased to note that each essay argued a debatable point, addressed the topic appropriately using a suitable tone and style, presented main ideas logically and coherently, addressed, acknowledged and refuted counterarguments, and referenced appropriate outside sources. Their essays, then, suggested that these students had been able to apply what they had learned to writing an effective traditional print based academic essay that argued a debatable idea.

### **The Effectiveness of the Blogs**

However, the extent to which students in my class were able to *transfer* what they knew about print based academic argument to academic argument that involved new media was not clearly demonstrated. Group #1 focused the final project on the topic of Facebook, in particular, on the question of whether Facebook is devaluing the meaning of friendship and whether it is a useful tool, or a serious waste of time. Students posted their essays on Tumblr and then supplemented what they wrote with YouTube clips and visual elements. Jane, the first student whose essay appears on the blog, argued that Facebook is not having a negative impact on the meaning of friendship, and, in fact, may be strengthening the quality of offline relationships. Joan, whose essay is second, argued that she “disagrees completely” with claims that Facebook lessens the meaning of the word “friend.” In fact, she, like Jane, emphasized that it actually “helps to improve our personal relationships as well as our communication skills.” John, whose essay is third, argued an opposing viewpoint. His essay states, “*Facebook is a good source of entertainment, but let’s not forget that it has the capability of ruining relationships, particularly among high school students who may not be mature enough to evaluate friendships accurately.*”

All of these ideas seem worth considering, and each essay contained compelling support from credible sources. However,

unlike the print essays, in which all sources pertained directly and appropriately to the idea being argued and were adequately introduced and discussed, the essays posted on the blogs included items that were only peripherally related to the ideas being addressed and some of them were inappropriate for formal academic writing because they consisted simply of unsupported assertions. One visual element was a YouTube clip about the danger of posting online; it depicts a young girl who posted a provocative picture of herself on Facebook, accompanied by a narrative voice cautioning “Once you post on Facebook, you can’t take it back.” Another element was a chart listing all the countries in which Facebook is popular, followed by a statement saying “What if they decide to close Facebook tomorrow? Facebook users are roaming the streets in tears, shoving photos of themselves in people’s faces and screaming, DO YOU LIKE THIS? DO YOU?” There was also another YouTube video of a girl who posted Facebook pictures of herself in her underwear and is recognized by a number of young men at the mall, who ask her about the color of her underwear and express admiration for her new tattoo, followed by several cartoons that are concerned with Facebook, but contribute nothing to the argument about Facebook and friendship. None of these visual elements had been introduced or discussed, although all of these students had appropriately introduced and discussed quoted material in their print essays.

In the blog posted by Group 2, the topic was concerned with an *Atlantic* magazine article titled, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” and again, students posted three fine essays, coherently argued and well supported. However, the addition of multimedia added nothing to the direction of their argument. One YouTube video simply asserted, “If Google is making us stupid, we are in big trouble.” The video consists only of a series of assertions, and it is followed by a graph which depicts how many consumers used a search engine to find information posted about themselves, followed by various cartoons that show how many people use Google on a daily basis. Some of the material was relevant to the topic, but much of it was not.



Several of the other blogs contained similarly irrelevant material, a phenomenon that raises questions about whether transfer had occurred. Were students unaware that new media based academic argument should adhere to standards of coherence that are similar to those associated with academic print-based argument? Did students not understand that the materials they included in the blog did not contribute directly to their argument? Did they view the multimedia text as a different genre, one in which coherence was not important?

### **Blogging and Academic Argument**

The inclusion of irrelevant material in the students' blogs suggests that perhaps a blog may not be a suitable genre for a final project in a course that emphasizes academic argument. In their essay, "Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog," Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd, noting the "dynamic, evolutionary nature" of genres, argue that "a Darwinian approach to genre requires an understanding of what makes a rhetorical action 'fitting' within its cultural environment." Tracing the history of early blogs, Miller and Shepherd cite three primary features: they were chronologically organized, contained links to sites of interest on the web, and provided commentary on the links" (1457). The article further notes that "there is central agreement on the central features that make a blog a blog. Most commentators define blogs on the basis of their reverse chronology, frequent updating, and combination of links with personal commentary" (1457). In terms of formal features, they observe that

All blogs contain dated entries, starting with the most recent, and a majority include external links. Blogs are composed of "posts," which include a date, a time stamp, and a permalink, and often include a link for commentary and the author's name, especially if multiple authors contribute to a blog. The reverse chronology and time-

stamping of posts create an “expectation of updates.” (1459-1460)

In the context of this definition, one may question the suitability of the blog as the most appropriate genre for a final project that is supposed to present a thoughtfully constructed, coherent academic argument, a genre that traditionally has been associated with thorough research, the entering of an ongoing conversation, and the inclusion of carefully considered, appropriately introduced, and analytically discussed outside references. Actually, the term, “final project,” suggests the idea of completion, a finished product, whereas a blog is not usually viewed as “finished” or “final,” because multiple users are encouraged to contribute to it. Perhaps, then, when students constructed their blogs, they focused on the characteristics of the blog itself and were therefore not as concerned about coherence as they were when they wrote their print essays, or maybe they viewed the visual elements as somehow separate from their print essays, in which case they did not consider whether or not they supported the argument of the essay. It is certainly possible that once students began working on their blogs, they no longer focused on “coherence.”

One direction that is important to consider concerns the extent to which the antecedent new media genres with which students were familiar had a significant influence on the choice of material included in their blogs. All of the students indicated that they were quite familiar with various blogging programs, websites and Facebook, genres that don't usually build *arguments* in the academic sense. Moreover, many of the genres in which students participate do include materials that are only tangentially related. So perhaps these new media elements may have been incorporated into students' arguments without students' being aware that they were inappropriate for a final *academic* project.

## Writing and New Technologies

The results of this project highlight the necessity for teachers to prepare students for using new media elements in the writing class, in particular to help students understand how new media elements should *function* when they are included in an academic text. If one expects coherence in a multimodal essay, the new media sources, like sources obtained from articles and books, should contribute substantively to the effectiveness of the argument—to provide support, elaboration, emphasis or refutation—and like any source, they need to be introduced, contextualized, and discussed. The students in my class had been eager to include multimodal elements, but apparently they had not considered these elements in terms of function. My students had been able to produce coherent print essays and were comfortable using new media; therefore, I had assumed that they would be able to transfer their understanding of coherence and produce coherent multimodal essays without further instruction. Obviously my expectations had been unrealistic.

My assumption that when students incorporated new media into their essays, the quality of those essays would be enhanced is paralleled by a similar assumption about word processing, when it was first included in writing courses. In a recent post to the Writing Program Administration discussion list, Michael Pemberton refers to a study published in 1985 in *Computers and Composition* about the effect of word processing on the quality of student writing which indicates that evaluators gave higher grades to papers when they were told that they had been written on a word processor, rather than on a typewriter. One interpretation of these results was that this phenomenon was the result of “demand characteristics”—that is the desire to “give the investigator what she was looking for, i.e., ‘this essay was written on a word processor, and I am probably supposed to give this a better grade’” (McAllister 3). Another possible interpretation was that the subjects were concerned with the *image* they were presenting to the investigator—that is, “if word processing is being saluted as THE technique of the moment, then perhaps the

subjects would want to appear equally accepting of this teaching” (McAllister 3). Certainly, it is worth considering whether our eagerness to incorporate new media genres into the composition course is due to an uncritical belief that “new” media must be better than “old” media in enabling student literacy—simply because it is new.

However, there is no turning back. Because new media so profoundly impact our students’ lives, we must explore its potential in the writing class—critically and carefully, without assuming that familiarity with new media will enable students to use them appropriately in an academic setting. In particular, when we include new media in our courses, we need to help students understand how multimodal essays are similar to and different from the print essays with which they are already familiar and show them how to incorporate new media elements thoughtfully and coherently, not simply downloading them as they might on a blog or Facebook page. We must also choose our new media genres carefully, evaluating their suitability for the purpose of our courses—for example, a webpage, using a program such as Weebly or Mahara, might have been a better choice for my students’ projects than a blog.

We do not know yet whether the incorporation of new media into traditional academic argument constitutes a “new” genre or simply a traditional genre with the addition of a few new features. But however our assignments evolve, class discussion about what constitutes a genre and how much a genre can change and still remain itself is critical for student success. Nora Ephron may have “bang(ed) away at the old forms,” eventually developing techniques associated with new journalism. However, in the writing class, the rapidity with which new media are impacting academic texts requires an additional focus on genre awareness.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Jarratt, Susan C., Katherine Mack, Alexandra Sartor, and Shevaun E. Watson. "Pedagogical Memory: Writing, Mapping, Translating." *Writing Program Administration* 33.1-2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 46-71. Print.

In a research study conducted at Irvine University, Jarratt et al. discovered through interviews with students several semesters after they had completed a first-year writing course, that although they had "internalized the idea of writing as a process and a mode of learning . . . even the most successful . . . lacked fluency in basic writing terminology" (2).

<sup>2</sup>This volume can be accessed at <<http://compositionforum.com/issue/26/>>.

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