

CHAPTER 24

DIGITAL WRITING AS TRANSFORMATIVE: INSTANTIATING ACADEMIC LITERACIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Colleen McKenna

Online writing has the potential to be transformative both for readers and writers. Online texts can be distributed, disruptive, playful and multi-voiced, and they can challenge our assumptions about power, publication, argument, genre, and audience. Increasingly, researchers are exploring how academic work can be performed in digital spaces (Sian Bayne, 2010; Robin Goodfellow, 2011; Colleen McKenna, 2012; Colleen McKenna and & Claire McAvinia, 2011; Bronwyn Williams, 2009); however nearly all this work takes student writing as its focus and all of these cited texts are published in conventional formats (journal articles or book chapters). An exception is Theresa Lillis, 2011 who manipulates standard article formatting by juxtaposing texts on a page—but the piece is still subject to the constraints of a conventional, paper-based journal. Nonetheless, academics are increasingly turning to digital spaces to write about their work, and a body of online scholarship, that largely sits outside institutional quality and promotion structures, is growing up, almost in parallel to more conventional genres of articles, books and reports. Furthermore, online journals such as *Kairos*, which publishes only multimodal “webtexts,” are promoting peer-reviewed, digital academic discourse.

In this piece I will consider some of the characteristics of digital writing (such as voice, modality, and spatial design) that are transforming practices of textual production and reading.¹ Building particularly on Lillis’s work on dialogism in academic writing (2003, 2011), I will attempt to demonstrate how certain types of digital academic writing can be mapped onto her expanded version of Mary Lea and Brian Street’s academic literacies framework, as dialogic, oppositional texts. I will argue that digital academic writing has a huge potential to represent academic literacies principles in practice as well as in theory. In terms of practices, I will draw on digital texts written by professional academics and students, as well as my experience of writing. I am regularly struck by the limitations of writing academic

pieces about the digital in a paper-based format. So, part of the basis of this chapter is the development of a digital intertext which explores the ways in which online academic writing can instantiate aspects of academic literacies theory.

JOURNEYS INTO DIGITAL WRITING

In order to explore issues associated with doing academic work online, I have developed a digital intertext which can be found at the following site: http://prezi.com/ux2fxamh1uno/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share.

In this context, I am using the term “intertext,” borrowed from poststructuralist literary criticism, to mean a text that is in conversation with another and which addresses similar, but not identical, material. “Intertext” seems more apt than “online version” because the movement between text types is not an act of translation: I am not just reproducing arguments expressed here in another space. Rather, while related concepts are being articulated, the digital environments demand and enable a range of different textual practices, particularly in terms of modality and spatial design. (For an example of a rich pair of digital intertexts, see Susan Delagrange’s work on the digital *Wunderkammer*, Delagrange, 2009a, screen shot in Figure 24.1, and Delagrange, 2009b).

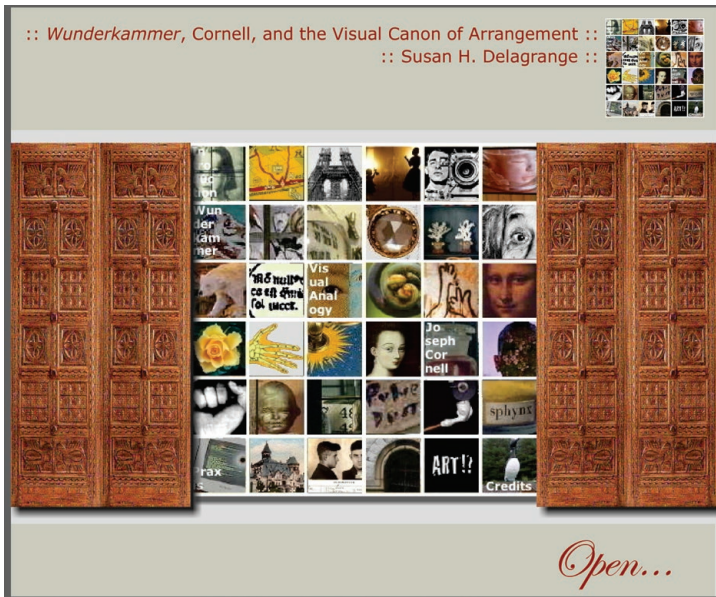


Figure 24.1: A screen shot from Delagrange (2009a).
Image by Susan Delagrange CC BY-NC, published originally in Kairos.

A particular challenge in my writing has been the selection of an apposite digital environment for the creation of the intertexts; “digital” writing can take many forms, and determining what genre, and thus what technical platform to use has been more difficult than anticipated. There were a number of issues to consider such as how far did I want to go back to first principles: for example, did I want to code the text in html? Did I want to build in opportunities for dialogue with readers? Did I mind using pre-formatted spaces? Is part of the purpose of this work to write within easily available and known genres such as blogs?

In terms of accessibility and familiarity of text type, a blog appeared to be an obvious choice. The affordances of blogs are that they allow for textual units or lexia of varying lengths, and they enable hypertextual, multimodal writing with inbuilt spaces for audiences to respond, so dialogism and hybridity are possible. There is also a tendency for the growing body of online academic writing referred to above to be published in this format. However, having initially written a blog on this topic, I ultimately found that the default organizing principle imposed too much of a linear, chronological arrangement of material.

So, after several false starts, I developed a Prezi.² Although Prezi is largely associated with presentations rather than texts to be read, there is no reason why it cannot be the source for text production. Indeed, the journal *Kairos* regularly publishes webtexts written using Prezi software. The advantages of Prezi texts (hereafter just Prezi) are that they offer a blank, “unbounded” space in which writing, images, audio, hyperlinks and video can be arranged. A chief affordance is the ease with which textual components can be positioned spatially and juxtaposed with one another; such visual organization is rather more constrained by mainstream blogging software. Furthermore, Prezis are technically easy to write and the author can offer multiple pathways through the text or none, leaving the reader to explore the digital space. The drawbacks with a Prezi are that the dialogic opportunities and practices associated with blogs are less evident and it is not really designed for extensive linking with other hypertexts.

Nevertheless, there is a certain writerly openness afforded by Prezi: there are no margins or pages—just screenspace. As Lillis (2011) drawing on Lipking suggests, in printed texts, there is a “danger of fixing the boundaries of our thinking to those of the published page ...” Digital academic texts have the potential to disrupt our ways of making arguments and describing ideas. They can foreground space and process, and they are often characterized by a lack of closure. They challenge what Lillis calls a textual “unity” and what David Kolb refers to as a “single ply” argument. Digital texts have the potential to bring dimensions including positioning, depth perception, alignment, juxtaposition, distance, and screen position, among others, to meaning making.

MODALITY—DISRUPTIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE

As has been suggested elsewhere, one of the defining qualities of digital writing is the capacity to create multimodal texts (Bayne, 2010; McKenna, 2012; McKenna & McAvinia, 2011). Students have suggested that the ability to introduce images, audio and animation enables them to knowingly disrupt and playfully subvert the conventions of academic writing and to introduce humour, irony and shifts in voice that they otherwise would not have considered to be appropriate in academic texts (McKenna & McAvinia, 2011).

However, for some students, engaging in this type of work prompts fundamental questions about what constitutes academic texts and practices. (For example, do online texts have conclusions? Who is your audience?) Writing in digital spaces has the potential to throw into relief textual features and reading and writing practices that are largely invisible with more conventional essayistic work. As Gunther Kress (2010a) has observed, multimodality shows us the limitations and “boundedness of language.” And beyond that, multimodality offers new and different opportunities for academic meaning making: “There are domains beyond the reach of language, where it is insufficient, where semiotic-conceptual work has to be and is done by means of other modes” (Kress, 2010a). The implication of this work and that of others, such as Lillis, is that digital texts may help “liberate” writers from the “structures of print” (Claire Lauer, 2012). Similarly, Delagrange (2009a) speaking of creating her digital *Wunderkammer* describes, how, in early iterations of the work, the written text literally and functionally “overwhelmed” the visual components of the work. The process of redesigning and rebalancing the work caused her to reconceptualize the topic, and she makes the point that, particularly when working with visual material, the very act of creating multimodal, digital texts creates a change in intellectual interpretation, argument and rhetorical approach.

SPACE, ORGANIZATION AND MAKING ARGUMENTS

A strong consideration when writing digital texts is the rhetorical function of spatial organization (and disorganization). In these texts, design is a mode: it is critical to meaning-making and has rhetorical requirements: layout, screen design, sizing; the positioning and presentation of elements all contribute to meaning making (Kress 2010b). Of course, this is not to say that design does not have a semantic role in conventional texts; however, I would argue that there are many fewer restrictions in digital writing, and much more scope to use spaces, gaps and other design elements. Additionally, digital texts enable multiple lines of argument or discussion to co-exist. Within individual sections of text or animation, a certain idea might be developed, but instead of an emphasis upon transitions sustaining a narrative line across an entire piece, a writer can represent the complexity of a web of ideas

through a digital text, drawing on a mix of modes:

It would be misleading to claim that all exposition and argument could and should be presented simply and clearly. Often that is the best way, but ... sometimes complex hypertext presentations would increase self-awareness, make important contextual connections and present concepts and rhetorical gestures that refuse to be straightforward and single-ply. (David Kolb, 2008)

One such rhetorical gesture is juxtaposition. Digital texts enable juxtaposition of sections of writing, image, video (among other modes) on many levels: the positioning within the frame of a screen, through hyperlinks, through pop-up animation, to name a few. With a digital environment such as Prezi, the sense of juxtaposition can be extended with the simulation of a 3D space; a reader can zoom into the text to reveal items seemingly located underneath texts on a particular screen. Or, they can zoom out, revealing “super” layers of writing, imagery, animation that appears to sit above a portion of the text. Perspective, as well as positioning can therefore be a feature of juxtaposition. (In accordance with Kress’s statement above about the boundedness of language, this rhetorical device is much better illustrated in the digital than on paper).

For Lillis (2011) juxtaposition is a transformative literacy practice that enables alternative ways of articulating academic knowledge including the enhancement of the single argumentative line with extra layers of “information, description and embedded argumentation.” Additionally, juxtaposition introduces the potential for a multivocal approach to academic writing, with juxtaposed texts in dialogue with one another, thus enabling linguistic and modal variety (Lillis, 2011). Set out in this way, the practices and features of juxtaposition that Lillis values (plurality of genre, tone, mode and discourse) are frequently features afforded in digital text making. In earlier research (McKenna & McAvinia, 2011) we found that students, almost without exception, used juxtaposition and multimodality in this way when they were given the opportunity to write hypertext assignments.

More recently, Bayne has spoken of the liberating impact of offering her MSc students the option of writing “digital essays.” The students use virtual worlds, blogs, video and hypertext to create digital texts which are experimental and unstable. She argues that through this work, students are able to interrogate the writing subject and that there is generally an enhanced awareness of the power relations between reader/writer. The texts are multimodal, disjointed, and often subversive, but they are sophisticated, provocative and stimulating (Bayne, 2012). Both the awareness of power as a feature of academic writing, as well as an awareness of the authorial self are prominent themes of the academic literacies research, particularly work by Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998), Roz Ivanič (1998) and Lillis (2001). Digital texts are useful in enacting these concepts in both practice and theory.

Additionally, Bayne's account suggests the transformative impact of engaging with multimodality and radically different opportunities for textual organization that digital texts have on authors: conventional literacy practices are defamiliarised and writers are potentially awakened to new possibilities for knowledge making. As one student writer told the author: "It [digital writing] does disturb the standard writing practices I definitely felt that in the hypertext I could not carry on writing like I did in the essay' (McKenna & McAvinia, 2011). We might ask whether a similar disruption is achieved through the publication of academics' digital scholarly work which disrupts the "normative stances towards meaning makings" (Lillis, 2011) that tend to operate in the academy. For example, Lauer (2011) citing Marshall McLuhan, writes about experiencing a "hybrid energy" when combining images and audio in a digital text, that enabled her to reflect more deeply and differently on her topic. Delagrange, too, observes that it is "impossible to overstate" the impact upon her argument and analysis of working in a digital space and attending to design, coding, screen organization and the integration (and dislocation) of different modes (2009a).

CONCLUSIONS: DIGITAL TEXTS AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES

Both digital texts (with their discontinuities and instabilities) and the associated practices (such as the dialogic interaction between reader and writer and the experimentation with new academic genres) are examples of academic literacies in action. Lillis suggests that the multivocal, dialogic academic text contests the primacy of the essayistic, monologic approach to writing that still is dominant in higher education. In her extension of the academic literacies framework (2003) she identifies dialogism as a literacy goal, and there is no doubt that digital texts and their related practices would sit comfortably in extended sections of her framework, particularly in the way that they make visible and challenge official and unofficial "discourse practices" (Lillis, 2003). Whereas Lillis asks "what are the implications for pedagogy?", this paper extends the question to ask what are the implications for professional academic writing?

Another component of the academic literacies framework foregrounded by digital writing is textual production. Textual production—in this case digital creation and publication—encompasses issues of power, modality, and writing as a social practice. Indeed a consideration of production highlights a potential point of fracture between institutional structures (publishers, universities) and writers. As many have observed, the academy is rooted in print literacy (Bayne, 2010; Goodfellow, 2011; Goodfellow & Lea, 2007; Colleen McKenna & Jane Hughes, 2013), with its inherent and symbolic stability and fixity. Print-based texts are

more easily controlled—both in terms of acceptance for publication and reader access—than digital ones are. The print “industry” supports a preservation of the status quo in terms of financial and quality models. And so, while I have been exploring the disruptive and potentially subversive features of digital writing from a rhetorical perspective, I feel they are also potentially disruptive from an institutional perspective: allowing scholars to cultivate an identity and readership that is much less easily regulated by a university, discipline or publisher. Beyond this, it is worth bearing in mind Delagrange’s observation that the production of digital texts is a “powerful heuristic in its own right” (2009a).

As more academic texts are published in online spaces, pressure will build for institutions to acknowledge the merit of the digital, both for students and academics. That is not to say that I think that conventional essays/articles/books will be displaced, because as suggested above, these new texts are often doing different types of intellectual work. Rather, we will have a wider range of genres and readers as well as a richer understanding about how knowledge can be articulated and read. As suggested above, a notable journal in this regard is *Kairos* (<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/about.html>) which publishes refereed “webtexts” (the journal’s term) ranging from recognizable, “conventional” papers that have been formatted to enable easy navigation to more experimental forms including powerpoint, webpages, videos, and Prezi documents. *Kairos* is designed to be read online and a founding principle was that a discussion of new forms of writing ought to be conducted in the forms themselves: “As we are discovering the value of hypertextual and other online writing, it is not only important to have a forum for exploring this growing type of composition, but it is essential that we have a webbed forum within which to hold those conversations.” (Mick Docherty, n.d.) Beyond such a forum, the value of digital discourse—which often displays a richness and diversity of resources that get flattened in the process of making monologic texts—should be acknowledged in the broader academic community.

Digital academic texts offer new opportunities for modality, spatial organization, reader-writer relationships and text production and distribution. Not only can academic literacies provide a useful frame through which to view such writing but, in return, such texts may help extend the literacies model. Beyond that, the social practices around production, distribution and reception of digital texts offer fertile ground for future academic literacies research.

NOTES

1. The “naming” of these sorts of texts is still relatively fluid (Lauer, 2012). In this paper, I am using the terms “digital writing” and “digital texts” to refer to academic work that is multimodal, created and distributed online, and which resists being easily “published in nondigital form” Delagrange (2009a).

2. For more information about Prezi software and texts, see www.prezi.com.

REFERENCES

- Bayne, S. (2012, March). *Digital disaggregation: Accessing the uncanny posthumanism*. Paper presented at the *Society for Research into Higher Education Digital University Network Launch seminar*, London.
- Bayne, S. (2010). Academeton, automaton, phantom: Uncanny digital pedagogies. *London Review of Education*, 8(1), 5-13.
- Delagrange, S. (2009a). When revision is redesign: Key questions for digital scholarship. *Kairos: A journal of rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy*, 14(1). Retrieved from <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/14.1/inventio/delagrange/index.html>
- Delagrange, S. (2009b). Wunderkammer, Cornell, and the visual canon of arrangement. *Kairos: A journal of rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy*, 13(2). Retrieved from <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/delagrange/>
- Docherty, M. (n.d.). "What is Kairos?" Retrieved from <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/about.html#sections>
- Goodfellow, R. (2011). Literacy, literacies and the digital in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(1), 131-144.
- Goodfellow, R., & Lea, M. (2007). *Challenging elearning in the university: A literacies perspective*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursual construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Kolb, D. (n.d.). Hypertext as subversive. Retrieved from http://www.dkolb.org/ht/univ2.dkolb/Introduction_143.html
- Kolb, D. (2008). The revenge of the page. Retrieved from <http://www.dkolb.org/fp002.kolb.pdf>
- Kolb, D. (n.d.) Sprawling places. Retrieved from http://www.dkolb.org/sprawling_places/index.html
- Kress, G. (2010a, February). *Social fragmentation and epistemological multiplicity: the doctoral thesis in an era of provisionality*. Keynote address The Doctoral Thesis in the Digital and Multimodal age, Institute of Education, London. Retrieved from <http://newdoctorates.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/doctoral-thesis-in-digital-and.html>
- Kress, G. (2010b). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Lauer, C. (2012). What's in a name? The anatomy of defining new/multi/modal/digital/media texts. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 17(1). Retrieved from <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/17.1/inventio/lauer/index.html>
- Lea, M., & Street, B. V. (1998). Student writing and staff feedback in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2),

157-172.

Lillis, T. (2001). *Student writing: access, regulation, desire*. London: Routledge.

Lillis, T. (2003). Student writing as “academic literacies”: Drawing on Bakhtin to move from critique to design. *Language and Education*, 17(3), 192-207.

Lillis, T. (2011) Legitimising dialogue as textual and ideological goal in academic writing for assessment and publication. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 10(4), 403-434.

McKenna, C. (2012). Digital texts and the construction of writerly spaces: Academic writing in hypertext. *Pratiques: Literacies Universitaires: Nouvelle Perspectives*, 153-154, 211-229.

McKenna, C., & Hughes, J. (2013). Values, digital texts and open practices—A changing scholarly landscape in higher education. In R. Goodfellow & M. Lea (Eds.), *Literacy in the digital university: Critical perspectives on learning, scholarship and technology*. London: Routledge.

McKenna, C., & McAvinia, C. (2011). Difference and discontinuity: Making meaning through hypertexts. In R. Land & S. Bayne (Eds.), *Digital difference: perspectives on online learning*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Williams, B. (2009). *Shimmering literacies: Popular culture and reading and writing online*. New York: Peter Laing