Snapshots of Complexity: Knowledge-Making and Negotiations in E-Rhetoric

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Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen note in Imagologies, "To sell your product, you must get down to business and take advertising and marketing seriously. The discourses of scholarly achievement not only define the wrong agenda but have no promotional strategy. If reason is to be practical in simulacrum, it must be electrified" (9). Selling a course such as E-Rhetoric, a course with only a recent history, therefore, would seem to demand a promotional agenda that echoes and enacts the electronic (e-) nature of the course. It is ironic then that a class on/using electronic discourse can only fill if advertised by flyers, as students consistently remain suspicious of a course with the title "E-Rhetoric" (despite its brief three-year history in the course catalog) and need standard course advertising to bravely register. The combination of the traditional subject matter, rhetoric, in a nontraditional

Snapshot #1: April 20, 2002
In the hallway of Old Main, hanging perilously on a lone staple, a blue flyer with a comic book-style image of a female entranced by a computer reads:

NEED TO FULFILL YOUR SECOND WRITING REQUIREMENT? TAKE ENGLISH 305: E-RHETORIC THIS FALL! ENGL 305 examines online writing on the Internet to determine the elements of effective web writing. We meet Tuesdays in a computer lab and Thursdays online. No technological experience is necessary.

"The task we now face is not to reject or turn away from complexity but to learn to live with it creatively" (Taylor 4).

Snapshot #2: August 29, 2002
I have seen firsthand evidence that "Hypertexts free the play of signs that has always constituted writing. This play is both trivial and deadly serious" (Taylor and Saarinen, "Styles" 7). During our first online chat about Aristotle's Rhetoric, someone took it upon himself to start doodling at the
format; the student and advisor resistance to this "unusual" course; and the limitations of what the course can accomplish in the given time frame of the semester—all result in complex promotional challenges.

Despite teaching E-Rhetoric for a few semesters and assuring the students that E-Rhetoric is indeed a "real" class, articulating the messy interfusion of online and "in class" days, hyper- and "paper" texts, and final web page and standard term paper assignments remains problematic due to the paradoxical limits and limitlessness of representation. As a result, the course doesn't sort itself out as neatly as the "Tuesday in class, Thursday online format" might initially indicate. The standard explanation offered to students during the introductory class (albeit to a sea of confused faces) is "The guiding text for the course is Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the goal of the class is to apply it to hypertexts, while using these same hypertexts to communicate our opinions." This explanation seldom satisfies, though some are relieved that we are at least using Aristotle, someone standard and reassuring.

As a starting point, Snapshot Two illustrates the unique pedagogical circumstances a moment of complexity offered by E-Rhetoric embodies: we are contemplating what it means to have class with the "blackboard" above our chat box using the tools that allow a user to create artwork there. I seized the moment to start a discussion about virtual classrooms.

Christine > Let's put Aristotle aside for a minute—check out the masterpiece above

Jennifer M > can you tell who is doing that?

Bradley > someone's in trouble!

Christine > why is someone in trouble?

Bradley > because they wrote on the board while we were talking

Christine > do the same ordinary class "rules" apply to online class?

Kathryn > not sure

Carolyn > it's rude to scribble on the board in regular classes so someone shouldn't do it here!

David > but it seems a shame to not play with the cool spray paint [a Blackboard tool that mimics spray paint] while we are talking. We can't really do this in normal class.

Steven > I think online class is totally different then regular class we should get to interact more with technology not behave the exact same way as always

Carolyn > that doesn't make sense. We are still talking about Rhetoric just like we would in regular class. Class is class

Christine > is it?

"The Web's virtual space offers technological access, although not full social access, and hence necessitates a new rhetorical stance" (Killoran 130).

Snapshot #3: September 5, 2002

Christine browsed to http://www.charmschool.com/
disorder of the graffiti artist above and a struggling discussion below in the chat box about the space online courses occupy; it seems impossible to describe both instances as part of an integrated learning experience. Exactly. “Falling between order and chaos, the moment of complexity is the point at which self-organizing systems emerge to create new patterns of coherence and structures of relation,” according to Taylor (24). While I often prompt and guide the discussion, other students feel the lack of boundaries hyperspace enables, and, understandably so, want to experiment. This example of disruption of the orderly system allows a new one that combines both to spontaneously emerge, as isolated yet communal, contradictory yet cohesive, instances. Surrounding course discussion simultaneously becomes the focus of course discussion and the motivating forces behind the discussion.

Defining the moment of complexity in E-Rhetoric thus becomes a challenging task. How does one articulate this complex overlap and negotiation of the means of physical and virtual classroom discussion, forms of study of classical works and hypertexts (sometimes of these same classics), and modes of web pages, standard term papers, and online posts? E-Rhetoric, a course that doesn’t look like any other, may provide some answers

Christine > check this out—is it using ethos, pathos, or logos
Jennifer > definitely a girl site
Christine > why?
Kathryn > yeah definitely
David > ethos
Bradley > pretty and pink
Lyndsey > what do you do if the site doesn’t come up?
Steven > i think ethos too
David > social grace is part of ethics because it shows you what is right to do
Christine > Lindsay—if you can’t get it above your chat box, open a new internet browser (keep bbd open) and check out charmschool.com
Lyndsey > ok
Steven > telling girls it is right to be graceful and charming
Carolyn > and have manners and things like that
Christine browsed to http://www.charmschool.com/store.cfm?cat=vanity
Christine > are these ethos, pathos, logos or some combo
Steven > this is troubling
Jennifer > combo I think
Carolyn > pathos because pink makes us think of being female and caring
Bradley > that girls are graceful beings
Steven > I think logos, although nothing here looks practical or reasonable ha ha. It makes it seem reasonable to be “girly.”
Christine > okay—is color pathos? is buying something pathos?
and offer an opportunity to articulate this overlap and negotiation. Besides allowing students to define techno-rhetoric for themselves, as in Snapshot Two (and in a common midpoint project in our class), a useful tool may be to engage in a series of snapshots of how the course "happens" in a moment of complexity. Taylor delineates the new constructions formed in such a moment noting, "Whereas walls divide and seclude in an effort to impose order and control, webs link and relate, entangling everyone in multiple, mutating, and mutually defining connections in which nobody is really in control. As connections proliferate, change accelerates, bringing everything to the edge of chaos. This is the moment of complexity" (23).

Complex instances, as evidenced by the snapshots, where students struggle with in-web and out-of-web meanings and the shaded space between them become these "mutually defining connections" where the students and I make meaning together. Though these happenings/snapshots are chaotic, as Taylor admits, the chaos is a joyful instance of true knowledge-making, far removed from memorize-and-repeat classrooms of old. A number of facets that contribute to each of these snapshots of E-Rhetoric are in place to make the overall moment of complexity happen. First, there is the assump-

Lyndsey > i think color is pathos
Steven > color can be pathos— it can raise certain emotions
Kathryn > when ever someone thingks of pink they automatically link it to girls
Carolyn > and how females maybe should be
Lyndsey > females should be grace-ful
Brandi > or how these people think women should be seen—it is almost like a political speech
Bradley > even though I don't like it personally i am glad the net makes it free for everyone to put up what they want
Steven > yet you are lead to believe this really is the place for grace
Jennifer > the same reason why they put pink on little girls when they r born . . . to make them feel a certain way

Dave > or other people feel a certain way about them, which is why the site is persuasive
Steven > where else could you find a pink poodle purse?

Late capitalism demands rethinking cyberspace.

Snapshot #4: September 15, 2002

During our offline class, students click, cut, paste, and design frantically as they construct their computer literacy autobiographies, web pages that present their technological experience in a hypertext format. Students laugh at my own page that shows an Apple IIe as the first computer I learned to use and return to expertly selecting backgrounds of floating diskettes and unique fonts. The more is less" speech I had given them obviously
tion that e-texts like those that emerge from chats online on Thursdays are “real” text, just as valid as any scholarly article found in the library. This assumption is only gained after a semester of exploring and writing e-texts extensively. Second, though technology remains the focus, the actual technology used to make meaning becomes invisible. This stems from the nature of technological artifacts, as described by Paul Standish in “Fetish for Effect,” where he argues, “Technological artifacts vary enormously, but a common characteristic is to be found in the way that they amplify some aspects of perception while subduing others” (157). Thus, the computer screen during chats fades into the background as the discussion comes alive, as does the Blackboard software we are chatting on, but these factors all contribute to the instances creating the moment of complexity. Occasionally the technology reasserts itself as in the example of Lindsey’s query in Snapshot Three about the web page not opening. Other factors also contribute, such as previous technical and rhetorical knowledge by students, and the willingness of students to continue the struggle to articulate concepts for which no terms exist.

The articulation difficulties are further emphasized as, while manifesting these snapshots of complexity, the E-Rhetoric course si-

was not heeded, as students aim to add as many bells and whistles as time permits. I resolve to have a discussion about what makes a web text effective, but then wonder if pages should be posted to get feedback from the university community versus my guided discussion. Didn’t they learn anything about effective e-rhetoric, I wonder?

“Credibility that has not been earned in a traditional sense of education, publication, or experience can be created from nothing” (Enos and Borrowman 95)

**Snapshot 5: October 31, 2002**

Christine > How are we persuaded that a site is rhetorically effective?
Jennifer > it’s content
Jennifer > and pics
Carolyn > language used
Bradley > from other people
Christine > how do you know it is reliable
Jennifer > the net reliable?

**David > you can never be certain i think**

Christine > What does a site have to have to “prove” it is reliable?
Kathryn > there isn’t anything it can do
Lyndsey > thats the problem—it is really hard to distinguish what is reliable or not

**Carolyn > u can look at the name . . . like a CNN website would be more reliable than some news site that a guy made up himself**

Jennifer > true
Christine > Good point Carolyn—because . . . ?
Carolyn > CNN is a worldwide source for news . . . they are accurate
multaneously enacts what Taylor and Saarinen call for in *Imagologies*, a reinvention of the art of the persuasion. The course not only reinvents but does so while studying the art of persuasion simultaneously through a classical and a hypertext lens because students must apply both classical and cyber methods of argument analysis. Taylor and Saarinen note: “Argument, like print culture itself, is a privileged technology of persuasion whose authority western philosophy has taken for granted [. . .] It is time to question the accepted paradigm of persuasion” (20). Students engage in questioning while simultaneously creating a new paradigm, as in Snapshot Five, where issues of ethos—such as whether counters are enough to make a site credible and whether we are credible as a class—are examined.

ENGL 305 demonstrates a moment of complexity at work by revealing these overlapping instances. The course indicates from the snapshots that it is possible to question argument while using basic fundamentals of argument itself to perform the questioning. It also indicates that new knowledge can be made while reshaping rhetoric, a classical text, to meet e-needs. But is it possible to fully do so while being restrained by templates in Blackboard, the online course software we are using? By the “regular” paper requirements, as a part Christine > and they have a reputation as being so right?
Kathryn > and its got a very positive reputation and respectable reputation at that
Dave > right we know it is better then Fox News. Katie what do you mean positive
Carolyn > how do you know that some guy who has his own news site is correct or that the stories are even true?
David > but even then a lot of times big news stations report stuff that isn’t true, or stuff they don’t have all the facts to, so you still have to be careful
Christine > so the site constructs its ethos by having an existing reputation that it uses online?
David > yes [. . .]
Christine > many have argued that the Internet allows those who haven’t been heard to post things . . . how do they get any ethos? Or logos or pathos?
Cale > they just tell you what you want to hear so it is all pathos appeals
Jennifer > they prolly get ethos by just linking to everyone else’s website
Carolyn > you do have to be careful but you feel better knowing the source is well known and it seems logical then to believe the web page
Jennifer > find out what looks good and credible and go with it if you want to make your own
Steven > the only way to establish a website is by building a positive reputation through it, not by its looks alone
Christine > Is linking to another
of the writing course sequence? By advisor resistance to scheduling students in this "new" course? And by student confusion over the title ("just what is E-Rhetoric anyway?")? These forces all shape the outcome of the course but, more importantly, the future happenings from it, further complicating the moment of complexity E-Rhetoric enables.

A course like E-Rhetoric isn't as neatly determined as Botany or Shakespeare, and terms to describe it on a flyer, to students, to faculty, to administrators are shifting and slippery. Part of the attraction to being a "pioneer" in the E-Rhetoric course is the new frontier metaphor frequently invoked in discussions of cyberspace, and most students who enroll are willing to engage in these tangles and take the plunge into an unknown course. While most are familiar with the Internet, the course attracts students who are simultaneously confused ("I want to learn more about computers") and fascinated ("I want to learn what it means to communicate via computers") to learn more about hypertext rhetorics. Both groups shape what we come to define as e-rhetoric, and the definition changes every semester as new complexities are added.

These contrasting concerns play out in many of the snapshots, where students attempt to define and discover e-rhetoric while using credible website enough to make your own site credible?
Steven > no; It might depend on if that site has restrictions on who it will allow to be linked to
Cale > it only could fool people
Kathryn > it's back up information not real ehtos
Christine > What about counters that show how many others have visited a site?
David > i think it helps to get hits to your site, but it definitelt doenst automatically make yours credible
Carolyn > all counters are for is to show people that the site does have visitors .. so it makes it look more reliable
Kathryn > you would have to read the material to see if it makes sense and not go by the counters
Lyndsey > people could get on the site and get right off but still be accounted for even if they dont agree with the site
Christine > Do our posts here have the same issues of credibility and authority?
Steven > yes, because we have been reading the same articles and because we can go check the logs to see who was right and who said what
David > Plus some people cite the articles like Bolter or links in their posts so we can all check back to the articles or web pages and it is faster to check.

Power is an e-rhetorical illusion.

A Sidebar on Snapshot #5
At this point in the course, issues have clearly become more complex. This chat occurred after an intense Tuesday in-class session spent
it to persuade others. In Snapshot Five, for example, students build on each other’s points to decide what builds credibility on the web. This snapshot illustrates Greg Ulmer’s notion of electracy where “electracy is the prosthesis of discovery, augmenting it, democratizing it, making discovery writable” (Ulmer 581). Our chats embody this potential for discovery, though the classical terminology of *Rhetoric* often falls short of describing persuasive hyperspaces and we grasp for terms that accurately describe these texts and the rhetorical effectiveness each offers.

As Snapshot Four indicates, complexity theory demands, and often expects, faith in technological discourse (techno-ethos) to function, and sometimes the only way to know if a site is rhetorically effective is to post it. Teaching and learning in electracy often provides these contested instances of teacher versus student control because students feel that after five weeks of analyzing hypertexts and manipulating them online they can create “a better one.” Yet control is a necessary part of electracy, and Ulmer notes, “One of the major features that electracy adds to literacy is this possibility of control over the virtual environment within which learning is experienced” (Ulmer 583). In a course such as E-Rhetoric, the control of text doesn’t neatly flow from teacher to stu-

analyzing various sites for ethos, pathos, and logos. In groups, students attempted to come to a consensus about what methods various web pages were using to persuade their audiences. This negotiation extended into our online class on Thursday where students not only analyzed the medium but also participated in it as the method for analysis.

A number of assumptions are at work in this particular discussion, illustrating Taylor’s moment of complexity. First, the presence of the assumption that the Internet isn’t reliable, unless proven otherwise, as illustrated by student hesitation to articulate what makes the Internet reliable, and even the bleakness of Kathryn’s answer that there isn’t anything we can do to make it reliable. After initial hesitation, Carolyn cites looking at the name/author of the site to determine credibility, which echoed Tuesday’s chat about invented ethos on web sites. We talked at this point about the three ways Aristotle saw how ethos could be misused: rhetors could be inexperienced, they may be malicious, or they may not care about their audience. David applies two of these possibilities when he notes that news sites might be misinformed or unprepared. These overlaps between in class information and online class application provide one facet in the moment of complexity, but the moment also illustrates how rhetoric becomes an actual strategy for web analysis, a living, breathing concept. Second, underlying this concept is the fact that students in chat are aware that they want to demonstrate features of a good rhetor. When arguments aren’t fully demonstrated, students
dent; instead, control exists in fragments, and sometimes the hypertext manipulates us. E-Rhetoric students become aware of these manipulations and these become course assumptions that additionally affect the moment of complexity.

Despite their awareness and willingness to acknowledge other hypertexts as valid, many students struggle to validate their own e-texts, or to assume these have ethos. As Pamela Gilbert has noted, “Often a netter’s handle, or history of previous postings (which constitute a body of work within which an author function is perceived) will provide the basis for that decision—that is, for an assessment of the ethos of the post” (29). Over the semester, students become aware of and make knowledge from these past connections as a text. For final research papers (one of the only “standard” term papers in the course) students used nontraditional sources, such as our online chat logs and (reluctantly) their own web pages as evidence.

I suspect that hybrid classes like E-Rhetoric offer even more complex possibilities of teaching and learning in electracy as neither the face-to-face nor completely online class assumptions are completely resolved. What does it mean when a class views Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* online but in a physical class setting, and argues about the effectiveness of a specific web argument while will question each other as when Dave asks Katie what she means by “positive” when she talks about CNN having a very positive reputation. At the end of the chat, when Steven and David assume that their posts have both credibility and authority, though I only posed the question about the same issues applying, both students assumed our chats can be just as credible as more established sources. This moment in context from and overlapping with our first class discussion about using our chat logs as sources and seeing a bunch of raised eyebrows (“what kind of class is this anyway”) illustrates Ulmer’s discussion of making discovery “writable.” Ulmer’s notion of *electracy* adds another layer to the above instances because E-Rhetoric enables the electracy.

Questions about politics, the medium of web pages, the role of the Internet are all engaged using rhetoric as a focus, as this snapshot indicates, and reveal growing student awareness of these issues and what such awareness might mean. Part of increasing student awareness can be the willingness of students to steer and control the tracks that the class discussions take. Though I may provide the food-for-thought questions, or discussion prompts, students debate and negotiate with each other.

“Effective patterns of meaning require a new architecture of complexity, which simultaneously embodies and articulates the logic of networking” (Taylor 17).

**Snapshot 6: December 12, 2002**

During our final exam time we spend the time viewing all class web pages and offering feedback on rhetorical
using that same classical argumentative strategy from rhetoric to make a point about rhetoric? These gaps call for a new way of thinking about a course like E-Rhetoric and the fragmented snapshots of instances existing within it, as Taylor notes:

The effective use of information and telematic technologies does not involve doing the same thing differently but doing something different. Writing and teaching are no longer limited to the printed and spoken word but expand through the creative interplay of words, sounds, and images. [...] Through the use of increasingly sophisticated multimedia, it is possible to develop new modes of interpretation and argumentation. (257–58)

E-rhetoric does something different; it enables not only a “loss of peripheral awareness” as Standish argues, but a gain of something larger and more inclusive (157). Including the space between a classical text and student analysis of an e-text, and becoming aware of the moment of complexity offered by these unique overlaps in e-courses like E-Rhetoric can offer new insights for how we teach rhetoric.

effectiveness. Many students argue that their sites are neither persuasive nor credible due to the fact that they are “school projects,” while others argue they are credible for just that reason since they are posted on my web space. This dilemma is understandable, as “on the Web, personal home page authors must struggle for ethos not only against resourceful, institutionally produced sites, but also against the stigmatization of their solo and hence putatively narcissistic labors” (Killoran 131). E-Rhetoric students are even more aware of these embedded dilemmas because they realize how hypertexts can be scrutinized for logos, and how texts can change authors and contexts at any moment.

“Securing a franchise in the new medium calls for a different rhetorical repertoire than that cultivated in most social and academic environments. Yet it is a rhetoric that, in our new future, will likely be required for an active literate citizenry.” (Killoran 128)

Snapshot #7: Epilogue

Paper Two: What is E-Rhetoric?

By now we have spent several weeks grappling with issues of electronic communication such as the possibility of “email for all,” the presence of one’s social class, gender, race, etc. in electronic chat forums, the features of effective web communication (dealt with in paper 1, your study of an effective website). You are now the expert. Your purpose in paper 2 is to define the term “e-rhetoric.”

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Notes

1. For a course description and to learn how ENGL 305 meets the University of Findlay's requirements, see www.findlay.edu/academics.

2. Other texts for this class include essays by Julian Dibbell, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, and Jay Bolter. These are read in conjunction with Aristotle to illustrate contemporary rhetorical dilemmas with cyberwriting.

3. For the purposes of this essay, “course” is used to determine all of the circumstances surrounding English 305: me, the students, our texts (including hypertexts), Blackboard, online chats, faculty hesitation to schedule students into the course, and so on.

4. Taylor notes the inherent problems of using Blackboard courseware, arguing that “courses adapted to software templates developed by for-profit companies tend to be pedagogically conservative” (238).

5. Chats have been edited slightly for length, but original typos remain because they retain the authenticity of the original chat, but also because when participating in a chat, “it has come to seem natural to tolerate typos, lack of case differentiation and free punctuation. [...] In spite of the absence of handwriting (and perhaps partly because of the presence of typos) there is a sense of directness and signature to the words on the screen” (Standish 166).

Works Cited


