Composition, Remember?  
A Response to Halbritter and Taylor’s  
"Remembering Composition"

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If 21st-century literacies are used well, they don’t eliminate existing curricula. Instead, teachers can use these literacies to broaden and complement what they’ve always taught.

—Lorna Collier

When push comes to shove, I am, I acknowledge, the meatloaf—the traditionalist. Along with my iPod, iTunes, my digital camera (video and still), and the like, I stubbornly hold on to and take full advantage of a turntable, my vinyl, VHS tapes, a 1947 RCA Victor radio, and several transistor radios (for baseball games). I am, above all, a preservationist.

All that said, I must emphatically remind those who do not know me that newer technologies have been good to me, and I to them. The preservationist is also an expansionist: a so-called “early adopter” of then-new technologies, I developed software in the early 1980s before the ubiquitous nature of the desktop; as early as 1985, I wrote and wrote often about issues of institutional contexts that impeded technologically based efforts in composition and administrative micromanaging that, as a result of investments in hardware, attempted to prescribe or decree (often) inappropriate pedagogical technique. I remember all too well the cautions that sought to temper our besotted enthusiasm for various technologies long before these admonitions about access, for one, acquired the authority of print (interestingly) in our professional journals—as early as 1983, with a number of technology-centered sessions at the CCCC entitled, in one instance, “Some Cautions About Those Wonderful Computers.”

I welcome the embarrassment of riches that we as compositionists face in the classroom. After all, I also love the ongoing expansion of the literary canon; I enjoy trying to decide what to teach and what to (sadly) set aside in a given term if I teach a literary survey, and I like the same challenge of teaching multiple literacies. And based on what I learn from
my colleagues in Halbritter and Taylor’s “Remembering Composition,” we seem, essentially, to be talking about issues of canon and genre—how much of what do we include in those fifteen weeks? What kinds of composing and writing do we teach, when and how do we teach them, and for what purpose should our students engage in various kinds of composing and hybridity of learning in our classes? Is the primary issue under consideration (as it's certainly not “if” or “when” to use new media) how to balance the literacies we attempt to teach—while keeping various genres of writing as the core of our mission?

Then there is the intriguing text of “Remembering Composition” itself. What is it that I have the privilege of “bookending” in that video? What are Halbritter and Taylor’s points of view regarding new media in the composition classroom—and what possible interpretations of the film and inferences on the part of the viewer become possible once we remove the relative certainty of our current, in-the-moment, and personal knowledge of their certain commitment to varieties of media? And what does the digitized image-text of “Remembering Composition” say as a scholarly work? And is it a scholarly work—or a work of journalism? Of art?

Were Halbritter and Taylor crafting a work of scholarship for publication in *JAC* or *CCC*, for instance, their collective or individual points of view would be transparently open, a convention of the genre that marks the best-wrought scholarly article—even if the points of view were, say, “The implications of teaching new media in the composition classroom are varied and complex, complexities that merit our close scrutiny as we examine and attempt to enact curricula that reflect a constructive balance of the literacies that we are committed to teach.” By implying rather than clearly stating their points of view, do they make new or more complex their perspectives, or do they abnegate their scholarly and pedagogical responsibilities? Does the (possibly) open-ended nature of the piece serve as a cautionary tale about new media in the composition curriculum? Or is this a deliberate, wide-ranging, journalistic narrative that enacts the consequences of and the dangers of forgetting (or of refusing to remember, or of being unable to remember) the core literacy that informs what we are bound to do? Or (and I hope this isn’t the case) is this a snapshot-celebration of talking heads with (what my daughter
would call) random insertion of variable cultural references, names, and texts? Is this just about Halbritter and Taylor? (I think not.)

Consider the end of the film. I assume that many of us were filmed (as I was) saying much more than was ultimately included in the final cut. With no deliberately overarching, dedicated perspective or narrative through which to apply the various testimonies (or “scholarly sources”) that appear, our individual testimonies and the order in which they appear can be seen as that much more (potentially) manipulative in the guise of their being random and narrative-free or liberatory. Why were certain sound-bites deemed more important or privileged than others? What, to borrow from another set of disciplines, was left on the cutting room floor? And as we attempt to engage with the postmodern, self-consciously alternative narrative of the piece, the disadvantage for the scholar-critic in this case might be similar devaluation of the scholarly tools and recognizable paradigms with which to evaluate the new media demonstration of new media philosophies, not unlike Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s evocation of technologies that subsume narrative clarity in the film industry:

When journalistic panegyrics publicize such technological innovations, the New Hollywood becomes a manifestation of what Ernest Mandel has called the specific form of bourgeois ideology under late capitalism: ‘belief in the omnipotence of technology.’ (373)

Do we see “only the technology” when we overemphasize new media in the composition classroom—pointing to the comment of one interviewee in the piece indicating that his students pick up a video camera, but with no (included, anyway) commentary about what this has to do with the teaching of writing? And this seeing “only the technology” was a concern of mine in my 1987 book, *On Composition and Computers*, along with other issues of concern that still plague us:

These exciting possibilities [of new media], however, raise the specter of access and ethics, suggesting both positive and negative issues to consider. Given the exciting pool of information for scholarship and teaching, how will scholars “protect” their ideas and still become part of the connected group or community? . . . How will professionals in poorly funded institutions provide com-
puter access for their students? How will professionals provide equal computer access across the curriculum? (89)

Perhaps “Remembering Composition” suggests that the more things change, the more they stay the same: our concerns haven’t progressed much—but the ante’s been raised as the media have evolved. Or, looking from a completely different direction, should we read “Remembering Composition” as a technological parable or (interestingly enough) *medieval allegory redux* about the vagaries, distractedness, and recursiveness of the traditional composing process—without the final product?

Looking at it from the perspective of traditional film editing, I find it reasonable to think that Halbritter and Taylor deliberately juxtapose my warning about how difficult our work is and the importance of achieving a balance within fifteen weeks in a writing-centered classroom—parallel to the concerns expressed by Erika Lindemann, Joe Harris, and Andrea Lunsford, for instance—with the final video by a UNC student. Her work, while certainly unobjectionable, is an excellent argument, some might say, *against* the unbridled use of new media in the composition classroom.

To wit: I showed “Remembering Composition” to several of my colleagues who teach filmmaking and other media, new and old. Apart from their consternation that we in composition studies would think that it was within our purview to actually *teach* new media rather than carefully and wisely incorporate it in the service of good writing (with which Halbritter and Taylor might, indeed, also concur—we don’t know), one person to whom I spoke in service of this response additionaly commented as follows:

The problem with that student video is that there is the *illusion* of creating meaning. *Just the illusion.* Nothing before or after it contextualizes what was done in the class, and as video such as I teach, it’s very weak. Randomized images—such as the student presents—are just too easy, like flipping the channels of a remote. *We are led to believe that these images are meaningful when they are not.* Anyone can overlay images of Dr. King with a child being told to look up plaintively. Are you people teaching filmmaking or teaching writing? Why does it matter what a student *likes to do*
in a writing class (like make films), when what she should be doing is learning to do the hard work of writing? (Anonymous; emphasis added)

And if this is the case, then, as always, context is everything. By closing “Remembering Composition” with this particular student video—after an interview centering on implied notions about accountability, balance, and quality control in our teaching of writing, educating of new teachers, and the like—do Halbritter and Taylor want us to “remember composition” and remember, like a corrective to misrepresentations about reader-response criticism, that however varied our ways of teaching, the use of new media isn’t just “anything goes?”

As I wrote in 1996, the web “effortlessly envelops existing genres and communications methodologies (and anti-methodologies) and (less obviously and more insidiously) all-too-familiar hegemonic practices” (“Power” 279). The same holds true for our use of new media within the composition classroom. Perhaps the answers to the implied questions that Halbritter and Taylor pose lie in defining the genres and different occasions for writing that we attempt to incorporate into our classrooms; however, “to create genre is an act of empowerment and potential disempowerment” (280). If all literature is cross-generic (Freedman 69), and if some genres and media are destined, as Diane P. Freedman indicates, to become marginalized, how do we ensure that genres of writing(s) are expanded, studied, and practiced deeply, and that they remain at the core of our work and our students’ learning? As Yancey and Spooner write (in 1996) in “Postings on a Genre of Email,” we need to be certain that in our classes we do not “mistak[e] transition for innovation” (262).

Reflecting my concern about our elitism should we not offer students opportunities for deep literacy in writing, Anne Frances Wysocki phrases this obligation in another, piercing way. Wysocki is writing in a response I commissioned for a “Re-Visions” feature in College Composition and Communication, one of several scholars re-evaluating Joseph Janangelo’s 1998 article on hypertext. Wysocki notes the following:

... It is ethics, it is always ethics, within every reddened marginal correction we make, every request for another draft, every discus-
sion about the social embeddedness and articulations of writing and composing. It is all about ethics in the oldest sense because we are trying, with those actions, to shape what we are to value—and how then we are to act—together, together as people who live in the same places or at least in some set of overlapping years. (282)

I particularly like Wysocki’s smart way of speaking to my own concern: how we “understand our tasks of bringing those younger than us to writing and the situations of writing—and how we do this as the situations of writing change under our fingers” (282; emphasis added). What responsibilities does “Remembering Composition” have as text—and what responsibilities do we as viewers/readers have to take our constructive charge and sense of obligation from it?

The technologies and media that immerse us have changed over the last twenty-five years; the questions have not, but the conversations about the answers seem more urgent than before. As we examine our embarrassment of riches and the ensuing questions raised about boundaries, interdisciplinarity, teaching, learning, scholarship, and the immediate need to know “what do I do in class on Monday morning?” we might want to recall 1986 and the words of Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores: “Let our awareness of the potentials for transformation guide our actions in creating and applying technology” (179). Here, those of us cowering under the label of “traditionalist” can become, among other things, the representatives for “ethics and responsibility” in Wysocki’s sense. Resurrecting anew the traditional tension between the authors’ intention and the meanings read and seen, Halbritter and Taylor have crossed genres and scholarly borders to confront us and engender that awareness—and to exhort us towards an accountable, ethical pedagogy of new media as part of composition.

After all, it’s about composition, remember?

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Works Cited


