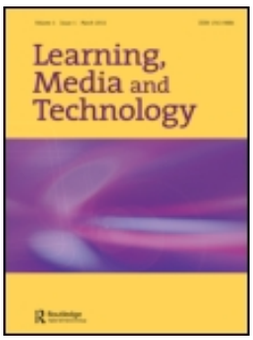

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EDITORIAL

Rhetoric and the politics of representation and communication in the digital age

Introduction

This special issue presents different approaches to a contemporary theory of rhetoric for exploring the politics of representation and communication in the digital age. As an evolving and multifaceted field, scholarly studies of rhetoric have explored the questions of who is communicating to whom, conveying what and communicating in which ways? Moreover, a contemporary (as opposed to classical) view of rhetoric brings together a number of positions in the communication arts including political literary criticism; bi- and multilingualism; multimodality; framing as an artistic and sociological device for composition and interpretation; literacy in the digital age; and issues of power and agency in communication (Andrews 2010). As such, a focus on rhetoric provides a framework through which the issues of ownership, authorial voice(s), power and the nature of the audience in a digitally mediated world can be described and explored. Such issues have an inevitable impact on learning both in terms of the shifting roles of the learner and the relationship between learner and educator.

Texts and context

Central to a theory of rhetoric is the notion of 'text' as the central communicative event or artefact through which the meaning is fixed and framed. The recent proliferation of digital resources is challenging the forms and formats of texts; the different vehicles (media) through which they are transported; the speed and pace at which they are exchanged and distributed across time and space; and crucially, the ways in which they are designed. It is, therefore, inadequate to think of texts as limited to writing or even to language. Social semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; van Leeuwen 2005) and the rise of 'visual methods' in research (Rose 2001) have prompted attention to 'multimodality' (Jewitt 2009; Kress 2010) as a major contribution to media and communication studies as well as to other fields. With a dual emphasis on the materiality of texts and the social context in which they are designed and interpreted, a multimodal perspective suggests that most texts include a range of modes (such as written and spoken language, gaze and gesture, the still and moving image) realized and orchestrated by the text-maker according to the semiotic resources at his or her disposal. Texts then are simultaneously designed according to the motivated choices of text-makers and according to their socio-cultural and institutional

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context. As such, social semioticians such as van Leeuwen (2005) have proposed that texts might be 'read' in terms of discourse (how semiotic resources are used to construct representations); genre (how semiotic resources are used to enact communicative interaction); style (how resources express identities and values through the performance of genres); and modality (how resources are used to create the truth or reality values of their representations). At the same time, the relationship between text and context is further problematized by the shifting affordances of digital resources with implications for rapid recontextualization and the corresponding challenge of 'reading' texts out of context.

Rhetoric and learning

The texts discussed in this special issue range from easily transportable artefacts such as *YouTube* videos, interactive websites, *Facebook* conversations, and *PowerPoint* presentations to 'events' such as the academic lecture. Emerging from both formal and informal learning contexts, they are designed and used in both 'virtual' and 'physical' domains – often serving to conflate or undermine these very binaries. Despite this range of texts and contexts, the articles in this special issue all unpack the relationship between the rhetorical composition of texts and their impact on learning. Understanding and using the rhetorical basis of communication (the arts of discourse) in order to compose and interpret better is a fundamentally educational activity. The de-politicization of communication in schools has arguably contributed to the compartmentalization of activities such as learning grammar, practising genres, and 'creative writing,' separating them from real-world communication. At the same time, informal learning is taking place outside schools and through design of and interaction with digital texts such as those produced through online gaming and social networking sites. New technological affordances facilitating rapid and wide dissemination of texts and enabling communal interaction with texts through massive virtual networks are contributing to the creative design of rhetorical strategies as well as generating new genres and genre-communities. As all five articles in this volume recognize, there is a corresponding blurring of the boundaries between text-maker and interpreter and a shift in the role of the learner from passive consumer to critical participant. Indeed, in practical terms, the transformation (technically *transduction*) of one mode or multimodal composition into another is at the heart of much pedagogy, for example, in the teaching of literacy and subject English through both 'reading' and 'writing' in the broadest senses. These transformations, in the social context of the classroom and outside it, are learning in action. In other words, what is learnt is the transformation itself. However, while innovative design of and interaction with texts can have a profound effect on learning, it is important to remember that practices acquired in one domain can also filter into other domains. While this may serve to challenge some of the rigid discourses of formal education, it may also lead to inappropriate use of informal conventions in formal settings.

Power and politics

With the shifting affordances of digital resources reallocating power to the 'audience' and blurring the distinction between composer and 'reader' a new democratization of knowledge production seems possible. However, institutional control of new technologies as well as virtual and physical spaces and infrastructure are often obscured, making the issue of ownership difficult to determine. Power is also infused in the individual and institutional agendas that govern composition. The papers in this volume provide examples of rhetorical strategies developed for a range of purposes, including gaining recognition by elite communities, transmitting values such as tolerance and multiculturalism and promoting particular types of literacy skills. Power is also channelled through the representational and *performative* (Butler 1990; Law 2004) capacities of texts, provoking questions such as which and whose reality is being represented? Where and how does the text expose an authoritative voice that does not belong to the represented world but rather to the social agent behind it? What signals are given about the balance between showing the world and changing it – between (as Engebretsen puts it in his contribution to this volume) 'the text as mimesis and the text as discursive action'. Such questions move discussions of rhetoric from the epistemological into the ontological.

The papers in this volume

The five articles presented in this special issue each explore the mediational effect of digital resources on rhetorical and representational strategies for communication with implications for learning. Spanning a range of theoretical and methodological approaches across multiple formal and informal learning contexts, the articles call into question traditional distinctions between learner and educator, designer and consumer of texts and virtual and physical domains of learning.

In the first article, Adami draws on a social semiotic framework to explore the effects of copy-and-paste practices on communication within three distinct media (*YouTube* videos and responses; *Facebook* discussions; and emails between a tutor and her students). Adami argues that the copy-and-paste affordance of many digital texts combines with a tendency towards intertextual reference to create a 'rhetoric of the implicit' which serves to redistribute responsibilities between communicative roles. Instead of passively consuming explicit representations, interpreters of texts are compelled to actively retrieve implicit meanings drawing on their knowledge of other contexts and shared systems of reference. In this way, the motivation for participating in such exchanges is linked to a desire to be included in 'elite' communities such as those of the 'Tubers'. At the same time, these practices also result in the (potentially inappropriate) applications of implicitness to other contexts, such as those of formal learning.

The second article by Engebretsen also explores the pedagogical implications of the shift in readers from passive consumers to active participants in the interpretation of multimodal texts. In a similar way to Adami's distinction between 'implicit' and 'explicit' rhetorical strategies, Engebretsen uses the notions of 'cohesion' and 'tension' to analyse patterns of multimodal rhetoric and the resulting positioning of the reader. While recognizing that different text genres call for different patterns of balance between cohesion and tension, Engebretsen focuses on 'informative texts' (illustrated by a multimodal 'special report' produced by the *New York Times*) claiming that within this genre concern for establishing cohesion is strong and that skills which draw on cohesional devices in the design of semiotically complex texts are highly valued. He argues, however, that such skills are insufficient and that designers of multimodal texts meant for learning also require rhetorical skills for establishing tension – namely a conscious shaping of 'gaps' for the reader to bridge. Engebretsen develops a model of user-text-interaction based on three overlapping dimensions (the material, semantic and performative aspects of a text) to show how modes are orchestrated in response to these rhetorical strategies.

Also from a social semiotic perspective, the third article by Maier interrogates a different type of informative text: the *Media Bites* video, which critically dissects the advertising discourses embedded in popular commercials. By analysing the rhetorical strategies employed for (in this case) the *persuasive* purposes of argumentation (with the purpose of challenging the legitimacy of the advertising discourses), Maier argues that the relationship between semiotic modes such as spoken/written language and image contribute to the persuasiveness of the text. Once again, the rhetorical strategies embedded in the multimodal texts also serve to reconfigure the viewer of the videos as a critical learner instead of a prospective consumer. Such an agenda resonates with the 'performative' dimension of the text identified by Engebretsen (which contrasts particularly with the 'semantic' dimension). While the purpose of the *Media Bites* video is to make explicit the ideological nature of the representations inherent in the commercials it addresses, the *Media Bites* video also draws on rhetorical strategies to make implicit its own representation of the commercials.

In the fourth article, Domingo makes a similar distinction between the semantic and socio-cultural dimensions of a text to demonstrate the disjuncture between the values accorded to 'in-school' literacy practices (where the socio-cultural dimensions of language are deemed secondary to its cognitive and linguistic functions) and the multimodal literacy practices of youths in and across out-of-school contexts. Drawing on discourse and multimodal analysis to explore her ethnographic data on the multilingual exchanges of a group of trans-cultural youth engaged in designing multimodal music texts, Domingo proposes the concept of 'linguistic layering': 'the artistic remix involved in crafting multisensory texts that deftly layer modes both spatially and temporally to carry social and cultural meanings'. She argues that literacy instruction in

school might recognize and build on such multimodal layering practices and in doing so, facilitate the shift in learners as passive interpreters of text to digital designers of multimodal meaning.

The final article by Gourlay focuses on a rather different type of text to those explored in the previous articles: the academic lecture as a 'verbal performance.' Drawing on posthumanist theory, Gourlay shows how the modern day lecture is mediated by a variety of digital resources which serve to disrupt the boundaries between virtual and physical learning spaces calling into contention binaries such as digital/analogue; then/now; and here/elsewhere. Focusing on three types of digital resource: online resources, networked mobile devices and virtual learning environments, Gourlay describes how the verbal speech event which has been central to the lecture is transformed temporally, spatially, modally and epistemologically. She argues that the corresponding displacement of the lecturer's body (by the positioning of screens), voice (by the visual presentation), and knowledge (by the accessibility of alternative sources of information) has a profound effect on the authority of both lecturer and lecture. As well as troubling the relationship between lecturer and student, this also raises questions about control over academic spaces and resources and the relative value of different types of academic knowledge.

In spite of the range of approaches and contexts that frame these five articles, they all give rise to some central questions: how do multimodal shifts in rhetorical strategies affect learning as well as the relationship between learner and educator? What is the effect of individual or institutional agendas (whether the desire to participate in an elite community, to define key 'skills' or learning outcomes, or to promote values of critical thinking or multicultural tolerance) on rhetorical practices? How does the introduction of new digital technologies transform (or legitimate) authority and control of spaces and resources? And what are the epistemological and ontological implications in terms of the ways in which knowledge is reconstituted and roles and relationships are re-enacted? This special issue proposes some conceptual and methodological tools for engaging with such questions with the intention of fuelling debate around the emerging field of rhetoric and the politics of representation and communication in the digital age.

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