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From Dartmouth to New London

Google Maps tells us that New London, NH, lies about twenty miles south of Dartmouth College, straight down Route 89. In 1994, a small group of scholars met in New London to talk about the future of literacy teaching in an age of rapid globalization and technological change. Their meeting has since influenced the teaching of writing more than any other event since the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar.

The New London Group consisted of ten scholars from three countries: Courtney Cazden, James Gee, and Sarah Michaels from the United States; Norman Fairclough and Gunther Kress from Great Britain; and Bill Cope, Mary Kalantzis, Alan Luke, Carmen Luke, and Martin Nakata from Australia. The direct result of their meeting was the 1996 manifesto “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” published in the Harvard Educational Review. A few years later, they enlisted a number of other scholars and teachers in elaborating on that pedagogy in Multiliteracies, a volume of essays edited in 2000 by Cope and Kalantzis.

The concerns driving the work of the New London Group are succinctly captured by Cope and Kalantzis in the opening pages of Multiliteracies. Playing on the name of the small and picturesque New England town where the group met, they note that

now one billion people speak that difficult and messy little language, English, spoken four centuries ago by only about a million or so people in the vicinity of London, old London. The story of the language, and the story of the last few centuries, including its many injustices, is the story of many new Londons. This issue—how the language meets with cultural and linguistic diversity—was one of our main concerns. (2000, 3)

It’s a compelling idea—that we now work and study in a world of many new Londons, of constantly emerging and evolving uses of English. It’s also an idea that takes you about as far as you can get from a view of English teaching as the transmission of either a single cultural heritage or a standard dialect.

While the New London Group didn’t argue for particular uses of the media in teaching, they did urge writing teachers to respond to the...
accelerating rate of change in the ways we communicate, the kinds of
texts we read and compose. They were also acutely aware that studying
or teaching English no longer involves, if it ever fully did, identifying
with a stable Anglo-American culture. English is now a world language—
which means not only that the students we work with will speak and
write many different versions of it, but that for many of them English
will be only one of several languages they know and use. Where the New
London Group was most prescient, though, was in viewing technologi-
ical change and cultural diversity as aspects of the same phenomenon
of globalization. Hence their use of the term multiliteracies. Literacies
are multiple because of the increasing range of media—print, graphic,
aural, digital—writers now have ready access to. But they are also mul-
tiple because more and more writers bring the resources of diverse cul-
tures and languages to their work. This led the New London Group to
argue for replacing an insistence on teaching the standard written form
of the national language with a focus on the expressive possibilities of
what they called the new "technologies of meaning" (1996, 64).

Or to put this another way. Question: How do the members of a
global and polyglot culture speak with one another? Answer: Any way
they can. Diverse modes of communication support diverse forms of
identity.

The key concept in teaching multiliteracies is design. For the New
London Group, the task of the writer is to forge new meanings out of
existing materials. A writer works not only with the resources of her lan-
guage but with the artifacts of her culture—print texts, web pages, pho-
tos, music, videos, graphic art, and the like. The challenge is not only
to respond to these materials but to creatively reuse them. Rather than
looking within the self for meaning, the writer looks outward, to the cul-
ture around her, reworking and redesigning the texts and materials it
has to offer her.

This is by no means a wholly new view of writing. Indeed a focus on
design, on manipulating the resources and materials of a culture, synchs
readily with the interests of classical rhetoricians in locating the available
means of persuasion in a given situation. It also aligns with the aims of
those who want to teach students how, as it were, to invent the univer-
sity, to adopt the established moves and strategies of writers in an aca-
demic discipline. Still, there are important differences in emphasis. The
concerns of both the theorists of classical rhetoric and academic writing
are almost exclusively verbal. They are interested in how writers use and
respond to the words of others. The focus of the New London Group spans a wider range of modes and materials. They are interested in how writers work in what Lawrence Lessig calls a remix culture (2008)—an environment in which texts, images, and recordings are constantly recycled and repurposed. It's a difference between learning how to do things with words and how to do things with texts.

After New London, a focus on textuality, design, and access has characterized much of the most interesting work done in composition. The work of the break here was probably Cynthia Selfe’s 1999 *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century*. In this brief and polemical book, Selfe brought what had until then been a kind of subdisciplinary backwater, the study of computers and composition, to the forefront of the field. She did so by shifting the question to be asked from *How do we use computers to teach writing?* to *How can students become critical users of the new technologies of meaning?* A few years later, Stuart Selber outlined a curriculum sponsoring such critical uses of the new media in his 2004 *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. Several other books on teaching the emerging technologies of meaning soon joined his—including Wysocki, Johnson-Eloia, Selfe, and Sirc’s 2004 *Writing New Media*, and Selfe’s 2007 *Teaching Multimodal Composition*.

More important, though, is how the remix culture has spurred many teachers to rethink the forms of academic writing itself. For instance, while Douglas Hesse has exhorted us to continue teaching “extended connective prose” (2009, 605), his own 2005 *CCCC* chair’s address, “Who Owns Writing?”, was a remarkable experiment in multimodality in which, drawing on music and images as well as print, he tried to define a place for writing teachers to speak from in a culture that often seems to have left “extended connective prose” far behind. Hesse composed his address in response to yet another virtuoso *CCCC* chair’s address given the previous year by Kathleen Yancey. In her 2004 “Made Not Only in Words,” Yancey argued that, if we are not to soon become irrelevant in a digital culture, writing teachers need to grow more interested in the kinds of composing—texting, AIM, YouTube, Facebook—that students do outside of school, in large part because these new technologies offer them possibilities of pleasure and meaning that traditional “composition” doesn’t. Small wonder, then, that by 2010 Gwendolyn Pough was to center the entire meeting of *CCCC* on the idea of The Remix, urging participants to rethink their writing and teaching in an age of “mashups to CLUSTERF*%#!s and all the wikis, flashbacks, multimodalities, and mapping in between” (5).
The point is not to turn away from essays and books in favor of tweets, blogs, and videos, but to consider what happens when so much of our work as writers and readers gets done online (or at least onscreen). Katherine Hayles warns against the “hyper attention” she believes is fostered by digital culture—a cognitive style she says is “characterized by switching focus rapidly between different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (2007, 187). Hayles contrasts this sort of intellectual restlessness with the “deep attention” she feels is encouraged by print culture. Perhaps. But surely intellectual work is also enriched—and democratized—by the unprecedented range of texts and materials that the web makes available. Students can now quote and analyze images, videos, and sound clips with a precision that a few years ago could only be trained upon print texts. They can also insert video and audio clips they’ve shot themselves into their writings. In a digital age our task as teachers will increasingly be to help students read and compose such multimodal texts with a deep attention.

In 1997, on what was then the last page of this book, I called on writing teachers and students to begin to “imagine new public spheres they’d like to have a hand in making” (124). It’s a grandiose phrase, but the plural of spheres may, I hope, save it from meaninglessness. I am encouraged by how the Internet offers us chances to create new sorts of public spaces, plural, to allow various groups of writers to make their words and ideas a little more visible to one another. Until very recently, students were routinely asked to produce essays in a format that imitated type-written texts being submitted for publication in a print journal—double spaced, underlines for italics, MLA works cited, and so forth. Usually, though, these apprentice manuscripts never got sent anywhere at all, but ended up piled in cardboard boxes outside of faculty offices, with a few professorial comments inked on their computer-printed pages. Now students are often asked to compose digital texts that make use of the affordances of the web—layering sounds, images, and writing. Ironically, though, these texts can also end up languishing in the digital dropboxes of their professors, or behind the password-protected firewalls of private, web-based, content-management systems—all of which can seem like little more than a high-tech version of what went on before.

What we need to do, then, is to use the web to change both how student texts circulate and how students interact with each other as readers and writers. When a student posts her work to a public blog,
for instance, she enters into what can be a very exciting sort of critical conversation—one in which not only her teacher but all of her classmates, and perhaps even some readers outside the course, can read and respond to what she has to say. This is not a new type of exchange—to the contrary, it is precisely the sort of conversation that many writing teachers have long tried to sponsor—but it is a kind of work that the web makes much easier. More than ever, the writing class can become a small public space, with the possibility of opening up to other such spaces.

Hayles and others worry that digital culture fosters a new sort of intellectual impatience. But while I very well understand the impulse to click on that next link, or to ever-so-quickly check my email or Facebook accounts, I know my own willingness to be distracted has long predated the Internet. Similarly, while I understand that many people now find it hard to sit and read actual print books with close attention, I suspect it has always been hard to read books with close attention. That's why we have school, with its deadlines and assignments. I thus remain doubtful that the digital era will lead to broad shifts in cognitive styles.

But the larger context of our work has changed—and in ways that for the most part strike me as exciting. Increasing numbers of students bring the resources of several cultures and languages to their work with us. We communicate through more channels and modes than ever before. Writers can create texts that are hybrids of words, images, and sounds—or they can work within the expressive possibilities of a single form (as I decided to do in reissuing this book). Surely intellectual work is augmented by this rich set of choices. It is an extraordinary time to teach writing.