

Bill Wolff
Writing for Electronic Communities, Spring 2008
Syllabus

Course Info

Course Location: Education Hall 2098

Office Location: Education Hall 3075

Contact: wolffw@rowan.edu

Course Web Sites: <http://williamwolff.org/courses/wec-spring-2008/>
<http://blackboard.rowan.edu>

Course Hours: H 7:00pm – 9:15pm

Office Hours: T 2:30 – 4:00

W 3:30 – 5:00 or by appt.

Office Phone: 856-256-5221

Course Description

In this course we will be considering the relationship among writing, electronic environments, and communities, as well as their multiple interpretations, particularly in terms of new media technologies. It is significant to note that though we will be looking at technology, not all technologies—past and present—exist among electronic environments. Rather, the electronic environments we will consider will be on and off line, and will cover range of spaces: books, web sites, movies, advertising, to name a few. We will explore how writing has impacted and has been impacted by these electronic environments, and how communities have emerged from and within them as a result.

The course has a significant reading component. Each of the texts has been selected to highlight a particular idea(s) on writing, electronic environments, and/or community. Some do not touch on electronic environments at all, while others are so engaged with them that we will have to parse just where one environment ends and another begins. Students will be exposed to various Web 2.0 technologies (Zotero, CiteULike, Twitter, Facebook, and so forth)—if they are released in time, Web 3.0 technologies (such as, Twine)—and we will discuss how you might be able to use them in your personal and/or professional work spaces.

The readings, materials, and assignments will benefit anyone who writes, presents, and/or consumes writing and presentations using any electronic-based communication medium or tool.

Brief Description of Assignments

We will be completing three overlapping projects.

Usability Project

Nielson and Loranger (2006) define usability as a “quality attribute of how easy something is to use” (p. xvi). Donald Norman (1990) puts it another way in “The Psychopathology of Everyday Things”: “‘You would need an engineering degree from MIT to work this,’ someone one told me, shaking his head in frustration over his brand new digital watch. Well, I have an engineering degree from MIT. (Kenneth Olsen has two of them, and he can't figure out a microwave oven.) Give me a few hours and I can figure out the watch. But why should it take hours?” (p. 1). In groups of three we are going to be conducting usability studies of large scale web sites. We will learn each phase of usability studies: locating the web site, designing the study, preparing IRB

documents, conducting the study, writing up the findings, and suggesting solutions (the last two in multiple formats).

Review Essay

Much like a standard book review that only focuses on one book, a review essay places three or more books in conversation to be both reviewed and analyzed in terms of a unifying theme(s). Journal editors tend to prefer review essays over book reviews because they are more scholarly in nature, more interesting, and more useful to readers. They are often written by authors who are trying to work out some ideas in new books they have read that are related in one way or another, and then lead to much larger scholarly pieces. We will be writing a review essay that discusses three books—two from the Required Texts and one of your own choosing from the Review Essay Book List. It will be written in publishable form for a particular journal, again of your own choosing. Specific requirements to come later.

Individual Blog

Each student will create, name, and post to their own blog. The topic of your posts will relate to your professional, educational, and personal interests—just as most blogs do. The posts are to be written for an intended, yet unknown audience, and not solely for the benefit of the class. Students are also expected to read on a regular basis each other's blogs, posting comments to posts and/or referencing posts in their own blog spaces. There will be no formal prompt for blog entries. Nor is there any requirement on the length of a blog post, nor the format that posts take or use. As we will see (and you may already be aware) post characteristics are determined by a host of factors, including author goals, subject matter, and time. This semester-long assignment will stretch our understanding of what the genre can do. Requirements: Minimum of 3 posts per week per student, one of which must touch on the weekly reading in a meaningful way.

Required Texts

- Fleck, L. (1981). *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson-Eilola, J. (2005). *Datacloud: Toward a new theory of online work*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Keivorkian, M. (2006). *Color monitors: The black face of technology in America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Landow, G.P. (2006). *Hypertext 3.0: Critical theory and new media in an era of globalization*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McLuhan, M. (2004). *Understanding me: Lectures and interviews*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Neilson, J. & Loranger, H. (2006). *Prioritizing Web Usability*. Berkeley: New Riders Press.
- Syverson, P. (1999). *The wealth of reality: An ecology of composition*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Tufte, E. (2006). *The cognitive style of PowerPoint: Pitching out corrupts within*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press. (pamphlet)
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Assorted online readings.

Course Strands

Discussion Leader

Starting in the second week of the course, each of you will take a week to lead the discussion of the week's readings. This is important, as the leader constructs a series of five questions for the group to pursue prior to coming to class. We will use those five questions think about the material the evening before class begins (and respond to some of those questions before coming to class). Everyone participates in the discussion surrounding the five questions the leader has raised. I ask that you post your questions to your blog no later than 10:00pm Tuesday night so everyone has a chance to read these questions and think about them (or respond briefly to them if they'd like) before class.

Some of you have participated in similar activities in other classes with mixed results. Let me explain that I ask for some decorum in our conversations. We come to this course with varying levels of expertise and various backgrounds academically. Let us respect all of those positions. No question is stupid if it is related to the readings and all responses should be valid ones. We are to use this element of the course to enrich our understanding of the material.

Review Essay Book List

Each student will select one text from the following list (each text can only be used by one student). I recommend obtaining these texts via the library and/or Rowan's EZ Borrow service.

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image / Music / Text* (S. Heath, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barrett, E. & Redmond, M. (Eds.). (1997). *Contextual media: Multimedia and interpretation*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Brown, J.S. & Duguid, P. (2002). *The Social Life of Information*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Campbell, V. (2004). *Information Age Journalism*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Gee, J.P. (2007). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (Rev. ed.) New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hayles, N.K. (2002). *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: NYU Press.
- Lanham, R. (1993). *The electronic word: Democracy, technology, and the arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCloud, S. (2000). *Reinventing comics: How imagination and technology are revolutionizing an art form*. New York: Perennial.
- Mitchell, W.J. *ME++ The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Nardi, B.A. & O'Day, V.L. (2000). *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Spinuzzi, C. (2003). *Tracing Genres through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Turchi, P. (2004). *Maps of the imagination: The writer as cartographer*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press.
- Vaidyanathan, S. (2003). *Copyrights and copywrongs: The rise of intellectual property and how it threatens creativity*. New York: NYU Press.

van Dijk, J.A.G. (2005). *The deepening divide: Inequality in the information society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Office Hours

Office hours are designed for you, giving you a more private environment in which we may talk about your work, your performance in class, etc. If you are unable to see me during my office hours, do not hesitate to make an appointment to see me at a different time.

Contacting Each Other

There will be times during the semester when I will need to contact the class and you will need to contact me. I will contact you via your Rowan email account, so please be sure that you are checking it regularly and/or forwarding it to the email service you use most regularly. I am in my office only during office hours and the brief times before and after class. As a result, calling me in my office will not get you an immediate response.

I strongly suggest you contact me via email, which I check all day long. Email, however, tends to be seen as an informal medium. This, however, should not always be the case. All emails that I send to you will have a meaningful subject line and a proper salutation (“Hi Class,” or “Hi Jane,” etc.). The first sentence will notify you of the purpose of the email, and then will get to the heart of the matter. It will end with a formal closing (“Thanks, BW”). I expect the same from any email you send. Any email that does not will immediately be deleted and not responded to.

Students with Disabilities

Your academic success is important. If you have a documented disability that may have an impact upon your work in this class, please contact me. Students must provide documentation of their disability to the Academic Success Center in order to receive official University services and accommodations. The Academic Success Center can be reached at 856.256.4234. The Center is located on the 3rd Floor of Savitz Hall. The staff is available to answer questions regarding accommodations or assist you in your pursuit of accommodations. We look forward to working with you to meet your learning goals.

Attendance and Late Work

You are expected to be in class. For every absence after 1 absence your final grade will be reduced by a full letter. A student is considered late if they arrive after the sign-up sheet has gone around the room; lateness equals .5 absences. Work handed in late will not be accepted.

Grading

Grades in this course are determined on the basis of a *Learning Record*, which accompanies a portfolio of work presented both at the midterm and at end of term. These portfolios present a selection of your work, formal and informal, plus ongoing observations about your learning, plus an analysis of your work development across five dimensions of learning: confidence and independence, knowledge and understanding, skills and strategies, use of prior and emerging experience, and reflectiveness. This development centers on the major strands of work:

Communication

Students will develop their ability to communicate using a variety of writing spaces. Students will also become familiar with how and when to use which communication space, the discourses associated with each, as well as the impact that each has on a particular audience.

Research

Students will gain greater familiarity with internet research as a means of adding to their own learning, and learn how to conduct a usability study of a large scale web site.

Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing

Students will develop their ability to read judiciously, think about, filter information about, and write about texts in a variety of genres and mediums.

Technology

Students will learn about and will use contemporary communication technologies in a variety of settings.

Collaboration

Students will develop their ability to work collaboratively in activities that range from online discussion postings to peer reviews to in-class discussion.

Grades correspond to the Graduate Handbook (A-C) for graduate students. All work is expected to be the student's own. Any plagiarism—intended or not—will result in a failing grade for the course.