Those who know me will also know that I love to tell the story of being at a conference in Detroit some years ago. At the time, conference-goers had been warned that the streets were very dangerous and were urged to take taxis everywhere. So I hailed a cab and got in, only to find that the restaurant I wanted was only a few short blocks away. As we rode this short distance, the driver looked at me in the rear view mirror and asked what I was doing in Detroit. I tried every way to be vague, saying I was at a conference, but he was insistent, so finally I said “I’m at a meeting of English teachers.” He did a double take and turned around to look back at me, a grin spreading: “Oh baby,” he said, “you got ‘English teacher’ written all over your face.”

He had a point. I do have “English teacher” written all over me. What I do not have written all over my face, however, is “computers and writing,” not by a long shot. When I won the ninth-grade typing medal in my junior high school, I did it on a manual typewriter, the kind you literally had to pound. Not until graduate school did I sink into the pleasures of the IBM selectric. At the age of 63, then, I am old enough to take a long view of the history of our work with technology, one that did little to prepare me for the learning curve I faced when I got my first computer in 1985.

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Since then I have become more proficient—and I am still a rocket-fast keyboarder thanks to that ninth-grade drilling. But I come to this conference very much as a learner, one who is almost daily surprised by how writing and the teaching of writing have changed in the thirty years of my career. It seems like every time I turn around there is another huge body of literature to be learned, a new set of practices to understand, a new kind of teaching to be mastered. What strikes me today is the fact that writing teachers have had to reinvent themselves and their discipline several times during my career and that more change is definitely in sight. No change has been more significant to me than the return of orality, performance, and delivery to the classroom. The increasing hegemony of writing throughout the nineteenth century had hidden the body and performance from critical view and shifted attention away from oral and embodied delivery to textual production of the printed page. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, however, and crescendoing in the last two decades, the arts and crafts associated with the fifth canon have moved to the center of our discipline. To view writing as an active performance—that is as an act always involving the body and performance—enriches I. A. Richards's notion of the “interanimation of words”: It is not only that individual words shift meaning given their context within a sentence, but also that words shift meaning given their embodied context and their physical location in the world. Calling attention to this phenomenon raises our awareness of the power language gains through physical interaction and exchange, and it transforms our understanding of Kenneth Burke’s (1961) “symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal.” To be human is to speak and write and perform through multiple systems of signification and to inhabit not only what Walter Ong (1982) calls “secondary orality,” a term associated with the electric technologies that make possible the phenomenon of 24/7 surround-sound split-screen cable-TV culture but also “secondary literacy,” a term I use to name a literacy that is both highly inflected by oral forms, structures, and rhythms and highly aware of itself as writing, understood as variously organized and mediated systems of signification.

In this scene of secondary orality and secondary literacy, student writers must be able to think critically and carefully about how to deliver the knowledge they produce. Yet we are still only marginally prepared to help them do so. It is as though our old reliable rhetorical triangle of writer, reader, and message is transforming itself before our eyes, moving from three discrete angles to a shimmering, humming, dynamic set of performative relationships. And in this scene, writing favors immediacy, quickness, associative leaps, and a fluid and flexible sense of correctness—akin to what Winston Weathers long ago described as Grammar B. As I’m using it, then, secondary literacy advances a looser prose style, infiltrated by visual and aural components to mirror the agility and shiftiness of language filtered through and transformed by digital technologies and to allow for, indeed demand, performance. To describe such literacies, we need more expansive definitions of writing along with a flexible critical vocabulary and catalogue of the writing and rhetorical situations that call for amplified, performative, and embodied discourses of many different kinds.

The Read/Write Weblog notes in late April, 2005, that “neither ‘read’ nor ‘write’ really means what it used to when we talk about literacy or being literate.” My colleague Marvin Diogenes and I (2006) have talked endlessly about what I’m calling our “vocabulary problem,” and eventually we tried our hand at defining writing in a way that does not mirror the reductiveness of current dictionary definitions. Get ready, because it’s clunky (at best), but here it is:
Writing: A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media.

For all its clumsiness, this definition aims to capture the sense of writing I am trying to evoke—writing as epistemic, performative, multivocal, multimodal, and multimediated. I feel certain that many here can improve on this definition, and I look forward to exploring definitions throughout the weekend.

I also hope we can spend some time working toward the more flexible critical vocabulary I just mentioned, and toward that end I’d like to point to the work of Tara Shankar, who has just completed her Ph.D. in Media Arts and Sciences at MIT. In her dissertation, “Speaking on the Record,” Shankar traces the increasing power of writing, which she terms graphocentrism, noting that writing eventually became “the primary outlet for the most elitist uses of languages in many cultures.” She argues that the domination of print-based writing is now at an end and introduces a set of terms aimed at clarifying communicative relationships. To begin, she defines literacy as “the knowledge of language, domains of experience, and structure of discourse that permit one to use language as an object for learning reflection and analysis” and distinguishes this from Seymour Papert’s term letteracy, the “mechanical and presentational skills specific to writing.” This she contrasts with prosodacy, “oral decoding and encoding abilities that indicate awareness of ways in which situated intentions, emotion, identity, and expression can be realized in and through the repleteness of spoken language.” Into this mix she adds the key term spriting. By “sprite,” a portmanteau combining speaking and writing, Shankar means speaking that “yields two technologically supported representations: the speech in audible form, and the speech in visual form. Spriting, therefore, equally encompasses digital speech recorders, speech editing tools, and any speech dictation recognition tools that would use speech in addition to text as an output mode.” The product of spriting she identifies as a spoken document, or talkument. As one reads a written text, she says, so one audes a talkument.

Much later in this fascinating dissertation, Shankar introduces spriting to two elementary schools and studies the collaborative “talkuments” the children produce using “SpriterWriter,” a system for composing and editing talkuments. Finding that students produce talkuments collaboratively with the greatest of ease, Shankar concludes that “Spriting seems to admit even closer, more integral collaborations than does writing, perhaps because spriting can more easily incorporate conversation as both planning and composition material.” Even more provocative to me, Shankar finds that “when children are released from the representational strictures of paper and pencil to compose language, they do not just talk their words, they sing their words [. . .]. They sing pure sound and rhythm, words, advertisements, school songs, popular songs and television theme songs with equal abandon.” That is to say, they perform.

I am not doing justice to Tara Shankar’s work here, but I use it to indicate that scholars, including many in the Computers and Composition community, are hard at work at creating the “flexible critical vocabulary” needed to describe the performative literacies of our students. Most of this audience is no doubt familiar with Jon Udell’s (2005) call for performative literacies to become “the new freshman comp.” In a discussion of the power of screencasting,
Udell says “Writing and editing will remain the foundation skills they always were [and Shankar would agree], but we’ll increasingly combine them with speech and video.” We can scarcely wait, however, for our own community, much less our society, to refine and accept such new terminologies or to perfect the tools and techniques.

While this work goes on, whatever we call what our students are doing is racing ahead of our ability to describe it. So what’s a poor writing program to do? In the face of the enormous changes to literacies, our program in Writing and Rhetoric has been challenged to add a second required course to the Stanford curriculum. This new course, which we implemented fully during this last school year, has a complex mandate. In it, students are to build on the rhetorical analysis, research, and argument abilities they practiced in their first writing course (and delivered primarily in traditional print forms) by continuing to carry out substantive research and develop compelling argumentative positions. But the course shifts focus from invention, arrangement, and style to the fifth canon, delivery.

Last September, the entire PWR faculty met for a week to work on this new PWR 2 course, and we ended the week exhilarated and enthusiastic about our goals:

- to build on the analytic and research-based argument strategies developed in PWR 1 through more intensive work with oral, visual, and multimedia rhetoric;
- to identify, evaluate, and synthesize materials across a range of media and to explore how to present these materials effectively in support of the students’ own arguments;
- to analyze the rhetoric of oral, visual, and multimedia documents with attention to how purpose, audience, and context help shape decisions about format, structure, and persuasive appeals;
- to learn to design appropriate and effective oral and multimedia texts;
- to conduct research appropriate to the specific documents being created;
- to reflect systematically on oral, visual, and multimedia rhetoric and writing (Fig. 1).

We decided to pursue these goals through an assignment sequence that would be standard across our many different themed sections. We’d begin with an assignment we called “texts in translation,” one that asked students to take a fairly brief text and translate it from one form of delivery to another, to analyze the rhetorical strategies operative in the two versions, and then present their findings to the class. This assignment would, we hoped, set the stage for a multimedia research-based argument, one that would include substantive writing, research, collaboration, and delivery of the argument in one or more media (Fig. 2).

This assignment would take up most of five to six weeks of the course and might include various steps such as a proposal, documentation of research, several drafts, and the final live delivery of the project. The final major project would ask students to create a reflective essay that essentially analyzed their work in the course, noting how various media shaped their writing, how their rhetorical choices were affected by various media, and how they used a new medium effectively in the presentation of research. This final meta-analysis would often lead to the third major class presentation.

As an aside, let me say that early on we faced the challenge of how to allow our students to “draft” their presentations in the same way they draft print essays. To address this issue, we developed a core of undergraduate tutors, one or two of whom would be attached to each section. The tutors, who take a special training course, observe and respond extensively to the
students’ practice presentations and help with taping the presentations for further discussion and analysis (Fig. 3).

Now had we not been in such a state of euphoria, we would have noticed that this set of goals and assignments is, at the very least, daunting. And certainly our experience in trying to
carry out one of our own assignments during our one-week institute should have alerted us to the difficulty of what we were planning to do. We plunged into teaching PWR 2 with abandon, however: In retrospect it’s easy to see that we were to some extent dazzled by the possibilities presented to us, especially in the tech classrooms Corinne Arracz specially designed for the PWR 2 classes. We and our students can do it all, we thought (Fig. 4).

And indeed, we managed to do a lot, as we’ve demonstrated in several presentations of our students’ research to Stanford faculty and alumni. Teachers and students alike plunged into multimedia writing, producing films and videos, extensive audio essays (which are being aired every week on our campus radio station), and Web texts of all kinds. But our students helped to rein us in. In their evaluations and in the extensive focus group discussions held with students following their experience in PWR 2, they told us in no uncertain terms that while they loved the opportunity to explore new media in writing and to push their writing in new directions, they weren’t sure their writing was actually improving. (In other words, they knew they were learning something, but many of them wouldn’t call it writing.) (Fig. 5)

So caught up were they in the fine points of Audacity or the pleasures of iMovie or the production of a Zine that the actual writing (or at least what students understood as writing) in these endeavors seemed to suffer. Moreover, they noted with irritation that the class workload differed dramatically across sections and, especially, that some classes provided for very thorough instruction in presentation and for lots of “drafts” of oral-multimedia presentations while others did not. In short, they echoed our own concerns. Mid-year reflection told us we did not have this course really “down” yet, so we went back to the drawing board. In particular, our Curriculum Committee worked to address three major concerns:
• How to balance academic with practical, real-world writing assignments;
• How to balance critique and analysis of multimedia rhetoric (skills most of us generally felt confident teaching) with practice in developing multimedia texts (here we felt less confident);
• How to balance technical training (ranging from PowerPoint to video production) with instruction in writing, rhetoric, and presentation.

We heard early on from upper administrators about their “horrible suspicion” that we might “just be teaching PowerPoint” on the one hand and from our Undergraduate Advisory Board on the other about their near-violent disagreements over what constituted an effective PowerPoint presentation, much less on how to teach one. So we’ve been particularly interested to compare reactions to this newly required second course to what we hear about PWR 1, the more “traditional” first-year course. While some students complain that our focus on research-based argument is too limiting and that they want a chance to write more creatively or expressively, we don’t hear complaints about how we define research-based argument in the context of a research university. It’s in the context of PWR 2 that everyone—and no one—is an expert, and we feel as though we are hearing from every one of these folks.

With these points in mind, a group of us, led by our Curriculum Committee, began to reconsider our course goals to try to focus more on the role of writing and presentation in the course. We realized, for example, that just as we did not expect students in PWR 1 to conduct research at the level of graduate students, so we should not expect students in PWR 2 to create full-length films, videos, hypertexts, or other digital work at the level of students with specialized training in those areas. (Indeed, as we were reminded politely, Stanford’s new major in Film and Media Studies would be grappling with that advanced task.) Instead, we posited that PWR 2 should orient students to media production as a means of persuasion in the way that PWR 1 does this task for research at the university level. What we had to remind ourselves (over and over again) was that the core values of PWR 2 entail rhetoric, research, argument, and presentation rather than advanced training in media production. The result of this rethinking and refocusing was fairly dramatic: Almost to a person, we felt that our PWR 2 courses in the spring were far more coherent and rigorous than the ones we had taught in the winter because they placed the delivery of a research-based argument at the center of the curriculum. And while we do not yet have student evaluations for these classes, we are hopeful that students will have noted the differences as well.

When we began our work on PWR 2, we thought redefining writing (as highly mediated) and developing a new vocabulary for communicative literacies would yield to careful observation: Just look around, we thought, and take note of what writing looks like today and how it functions—then new definitions and terms will be apparent enough. How naïve could we be! Redefining terms is one thing; realizing and fully implementing any such redefinitions is quite another. Indeed, we have learned that teaching writing based on a substantive redefinition of writing affects every single aspect of our work: our theories of writing, our curriculum, our classroom configurations, our staffing, training, evaluation principles and procedures, our relationships with other programs (and with upper administration), and our methods and materials. As many presenters at the 2005 Computers and Writing conference noted, traditional and familiar theories of writing have not focused on the material conditions of production or accounted for the inclusion of aural and visual elements (what we have nicknamed the “three v’s: vocal, visual, verbal”) at every stage of the writing process, much less on effective ways to perform the knowledge produced during those stages. And while the field of composition has led the way in how best to assess traditional forms of academic writing, we are now engaged...
in the complex work of assessing forms of digital, multimedia, and performed writing. We have even had to rethink our methods, from how we use collaboration in the classroom, to how we teach research, to how we respond to students and their writing (or scriptwriting).

We of course are not the only ones struggling with this set of complex issues, as this conference demonstrates loud and clear, which is one reason we are so delighted to be welcoming all of you to our campus and program. So maybe I am beginning to have “computers and writing” written all over my face, if just barely.

In a blog entry on “screencasting as the new FYC,” C. G. Brooke (2005) takes up Jon Udell’s question, “Would I really suggest that techies will become fluid storytellers not only in the medium of the written essay, but also in the medium of the narrated screen cast?” and then turns that quotation around to say “Would I really suggest that first-year composition take up the challenge of meeting those techies halfway, as well as the challenge of questioning our assumptions about the scope of writing?” to which he answers “Hell yes.” This is the challenge my colleague Eric Miraglia raised for us this year: how to fulfill our Faculty Senate’s mandate to “teach writing and speaking” while allowing students an opportunity for “authoring in the most compelling discursive modalities of their generation.” It is a challenge our community of teachers and scholars has taken on wholeheartedly and one we look forward to following in our journals and conferences during the coming year.

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