

Interchanges

Response to Cynthia L. Selfe's "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing"

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Editor's Note: Doug Hesse has written a commentary on "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing" by Cynthia L. Selfe, which appeared in *College Composition and Communication* 60.4 (June 2009) 616–63. Cynthia then responds to Doug's remarks. The full text of the original article is available at the CCC website: www.ncte.org/cccc/ccc.

Cindy Selfe makes a compelling argument that compositionists should embrace aurality as an aspect of our classrooms. She sketches the deep history of speaking and listening in composition course forebears; suggests writing's privilege is a historical manifestation of class, race, and gender interests; and cites the increasingly prominent (even dominant) role that aural and visual modes play in contemporary communication, especially in popular spheres and especially among current students. Her work is careful and alluring. Teaching as she would have us teach is not only inviting but also consonant with national calls for expanded views of literacy and textuality, such as NCTE's policy brief on *21st Century Literacies*. And yet (you knew the "yet" was coming), it begs two

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questions. In raising them, I'm not saying that Selfe is wrong but, rather, that there are large prior issues that we need to sort.

Question 1: Is the curricular space that our field inhabits “rhetoric/composing” or is it “writing/composing?” Without tracing the debate over whether contemporary composition was born of rhetoric or parented by something else, I’ll simply note that “rhetoric” is a more capacious territory. A course in rhetoric, understood in the term’s current breadth, admits to “the available means of persuasion” any and all possible modes of delivery, paragraph to pixel to pantomime, with rhetorical situation determining the best fit. Writing describes a subset of rhetoric: those productions whose mode of delivery is written language. In composition-as-rhetoric, a wordless cartoon or a minor-key melody may be an acceptable target discourse. In composition-as-writing, they would not (though an intermingling of word and image in some fuzzy ratio and relationship would).

I make this observation not to elevate one definition over the other. Indeed, my point is ultimately that the profession needs to have this out, at a high conceptual level rather than an accretive lower one. We need to do this with the full participation of all stakeholders in composition courses, especially if they’re required. I’ll offer a *reductio ad absurdum* analogy. If I am teaching a studio course in “watercolor” but devote substantial instruction to casting bronzes, I’ll have to defend my curriculum more than if I were teaching a course in “making art.” Or, even more extremely, if I’m to teach German but, noting the world’s economic drift (not to mention sheer numbers), I decide instead to teach Chinese, I shouldn’t be surprised if some stakeholders object.

Now, I see Cindy’s aim in this article as nothing short of calling for an expansive redefinition (she would see it as a reclamation) of composition as rhetoric. I’m persuadable but pragmatic. I just think we need to be forthright and open about the terms of that work, all the way from how we name courses to how we specify the artifacts and genres students produce in them. There are political as well as philosophical implications. The political issues include curricular turf and institutional sanction. As many have noted, the term “composition” is enjoying a surprising and welcome resurrection from its entombment as first-year comp. If we’re going to use it as the umbrella for a wider host of textual practices than academic writing or public argument, then we ought to be clear in our catalogs and to our colleagues that we’re shifting the definition.

Question 2: Whose interests should the composition class serve? Historically we’ve shuttled between three of them: those of the academy, those of the workplace, and those of the polis, with an occasional fourth and fifth: those

of the individual, including in social relationships, and those of discourse, especially in aesthetic production. As long as language was deemed factorable into discrete skills, arts, or operations, it didn't much matter which interests were privileged. Any one was a path to any other. We could just give students tools: vocabulary, sentence, paragraph; invention, revision, editing; font, hanging indent, track change; link, crop, fade. However, it's hard to be so sanguine, in the aftermath of genre and activity theory, that any tool neatly transfers to any sphere or purpose. Perhaps the best we can do is tour students through the taxonomy of roles, audiences, situations, affordances, constraints, and rhetoricity: a tall order for a course or two.

Selfe's perspective on interests is especially fresh—and, as a result, complex. After acknowledging that "writing will continue to be a hallmark of educated citizens in the United States for some time to come," she goes further:

I do want to argue that teachers of composition need to pay attention to, and come to value, the *multiple* ways in which students compose and communicate meaning, the exciting hybrid, multimodal texts they create—in both nondigital and digital environments—to meet their own needs in a changing world. We need to better understand the importance that students attach to composing, exchanging, and interpreting new and different kinds of texts that help them make sense of their experiences and lives—songs and lyrics, videos, written essays illustrated with images, personal Web pages that include sound clips. We need to learn from their motivated efforts to communicate with each other, for themselves and for others, often in resistance to the world we have created for them. We need to respect the rhetorical sovereignty of young people from different backgrounds, communities, colors, and cultures, to observe and understand the rhetorical choices they are making, and to offer them new ways of making meaning, new choices, new ways of accomplishing their goals. (642)

I'll set aside empirical questions of how many students actually are composing (as opposed to consuming) in what kinds of modes and media (a recent Pew study, for example, reports that 11 percent of teens have a website and 27 percent a blog, with 65 percent using social networking sites; see Lenhart). I want instead to focus on the clash between the rhetorical choices young people are making and the rhetorical choices they are not making (and, to be fair, neither are vast swaths of the general population), the goals they set, the goals they don't.

The tension between the "rhetorical sovereignty" of individuals and the expectations of the work and civic realms in which they might participate has both pragmatic and philosophical dimensions. The clash is nothing new; in educational theory, it tracks through Dewey, Emerson, the German romantics,

and so on. At stake is how composing for the self-sponsored and largely ludic purposes that Selfe aptly celebrates might connect to purposes and environments that are, instead, obliged and sanctioned. The hope seems that student engagement will make them responsive to our “offer” (which, I assume, they can decline) of “new ways of making meaning,” ways that I trust can include writing extended connective prose.

The question of whose interests the course ought to serve ultimately is an ethical one. Part of it involves “what’s good for the student”—but the student as worker, citizen, friend, soul? Part of it is “what’s good for the various cultures and subcultures” in which decisions are made, resources distributed, and ideas championed. As I’m writing, national health care reform is generating huge volumes of rhetorical activity; I long for more reasoned and developed rationales than the glib sound and image bites proffered from all angles. Critics will rightly cite that alphabetic and essayistic literacy hasn’t yet created social equality or economic justice, let alone happiness, so what’s to lose in expanding compositional modes? Fair point. I simply submit that there are ethical as well as rhetorical dimensions to the affordances and constraints of modes and media, and that education has long tempered “what works” or “what’s interesting” with “what should be.”

My purpose is to temper Selfe's thoughtful argument, because the practices it advocates entail more than some supplemental tweak of current courses. At stake are fundamental boundaries of our curricular landscape and our sense of its stakeholders, interests, and purposes. Like many readers of her article, I'm inclined to make a place for the aurality in my own teaching even as I ponder whether I'm overstepping or sidestepping professional roles that best serve student and social interests.

Works Cited

- Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens and Social Media: *21st Century Literacies*. Urbana: NCTE, 2008. An Overview." PewInternet: Pew Internet and American Life Project. 10 Apr. 2009. Web. 17 Aug. 2009.