Symposium: What Should College English Be?

Networks and New Media

Jeff Rice

A college is a place where knowledge is pursued in concert, in the experience of trying it out on other people.

—Wayne Booth, The Vocation of a Teacher, p. 285

When we ask “What should college English be?” I want to respond, “College English should be new media.” I make that claim in order to begin a discussion regarding how English studies might consider the problems and demands new media pose for the work done in literary studies, film studies, cultural studies, composition studies, or other areas associated with college English, principally as these areas engage with writing. Making that claim is not a rejection of current work but rather a desire to draw attention to one aspect of new media, the network, whose role in shaping and sharing information continues to increase within the media world we inhabit. In particular, the network manifests itself online on the Web, via social software in stand-alone and Web applications, through e-mail, within databases, within marketing, through public policy, and among other related new-media applications and experiences. “Our culture's practical engagement with such digital forms as the World Wide Web,” Jay David Bolter writes, “may compel us to rethink the relationship of media theory and practice in the humanities” (16). For the question of what college English should be, I want to narrow Bolter’s claim by imagining his call as one for networks.

Jeff Rice is assistant professor of English at Wayne State University, where he teaches courses in rhetoric, pedagogy, new media, and composition. His book The Rhetoric of Cool: A Theory of Writing and New Media is forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.
Networks foreground the role connectivity plays in content management, information organization, and information production in explicit and implicit ways. When I participate in an online service like LiveJournal, Facebook, or MySpace, I engage with a series of interconnected encounters at the level of personality, writing, interest, politics, and taste. The moment I view an advertisement on TV, in the movie theater, or on the Web, and that ad calls to me (purchase this product/identify with it), I enter into an economic and emotional connection with new media production. When I make a purchase on any of the online services such as Amazon, Overstock, or eBay, I work within a networked path of associations and connections, all of which draw upon my past habits and direct me to a variety of products and links the services provide. All of these kinds of activities interlink information and users of information in ways English studies has not yet fully explored. These activities foreground how relationships function in new media experiences. “I think therefore I connect with all the other cognizers in my environment,” Katherine Hayles writes, noting that linking—conceptually and practically—offers an emerging form of expression (213). Whereas traditionally English studies has considered the ways relationships and connections work between texts and race, gender, or class (cultural studies), how connections affect critique (critical pedagogy), or the roles connections play in cultural analysis (articulation), it has not yet imagined connectivity as the place of college English itself. College English has not yet imagined or perceived itself as a network.

“Today,” Steven Shaviro writes, “we are inclined to see nearly everything in terms of connections and networks” (3). “Networks are present everywhere,” Albert-László Barabási adds. “All we need is an eye for them” (7). What Barabási calls the “eye,” I generalize as an emerging sense of perception shaped by connections. This type of perception may be filtered, as in a Google search that connects vast amounts of information and displays it through an interface, or it may result in open-ended information, as a wiki might generate through a never-ending array of internal links and open editing. Or it may involve a complete reworking of how information is classified and stored, as the emerging practice of folksonomy, a system where anyone can attach any term to any piece of information, does in a direct challenge to referential organizational systems. What I call the network are these spaces—literal or figurative—of connectivity. They are ideological as well as technological spaces generated by various forms of new media that allow information, people, places, and other items to establish a variety of relationships that previous spaces or ideologies of space (print being the dominant model) did not allow. Enthusiasts may regard the network as a positive space whose potential is in learning ways to relate information, as for example George Landow describes the advanced curriculum he has initiated at the University Scholars Program at the National University of Singapore (41).
Critics may understand the rise of the network as further extending a globalized economy at the expense of equality (Virno 59).

That last point is worth a bit more unpacking because every effort to understand new communicative innovations comes with well-placed fears and concerns. Network criticism often focuses on the continuation of capitalist marketing and branding, the consolidation of intellectual property into one controlled hub, or the hegemony of political inequity. Debates on the nettime-l discussion list, for instance, often critique networked exchanges of cultural workers and industrial power by arguing that increases in informational exchanges lead to oppressive working conditions for those who are not contributing to a given network, but rather are being used by it. Regarding intellectual property law, Lawrence Lessig and Siva Vaidhyanathan write extensively about how networks are imposing a new wave of intellectual stagnation; as dominant holders of intellectual work establish larger chains of control (or what we might recognize as internal networks), these entities limit how their holdings interact with other ideas or writings. With these points in mind, it is still useful to consider Matthew Fuller’s remark that in the network, “each of these elements within the media ecology is only potentially branded by any particular company” (39). In other words, it is important to remain aware of how networks may institutionalize practices and beliefs deemed negative, but it is just as important to realize that “potentials” are still in circulation. Whether for good or for bad, the network is reimagining social and informational relationships so profoundly that even if the discipline of English studies remains wary of the network and suspicious of its place within the curriculum, the field can still benefit from learning how networks alter both understandings of writing and writing itself.

All media work us over completely, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore famously wrote, as they examined the ways perception changes through new-media influence. “The main obstacle to a clear understanding of the effects of the new media is our deeply embedded habit of regarding all phenomena from a fixed point of view” (68). English studies maintains a fixed point of view through a singular notion of writing as static, fixed, and individually composed (typically via the essay or the exam), taking place in a unified realm of thought deemed “English.” The definitions of “writing” produced in this economy of thought (response essay, analytical paper, personal essay) no longer serve the media society of networks and connections contemporary culture generates as these definitions of writing are now performed. The time has come to rethink the metaphor of writing because its image is too structured around fixity. “The age of writing has passed,” McLuhan writes, “we must invent a new metaphor, restructure our thoughts and feelings” (17). We must invent a new metaphor because, on its own, “writing” feels too limited in an age of total information delivery and connectivity.
What, then, might such a metaphor be or entail? The network, a product of new-media culture, proves to be one metaphor worth consideration, particularly for how it functions within media-based rhetorical production and contributes to the creation of media-being identities, particularly those that are disciplinary. When William Burroughs wrote in *Nova Express* that “The basic law of association and conditioning is known to college students even in America: Any object, feeling, odor, word, image in juxtaposition with any other object, feeling, word or image will be associated with it,” he wrote about the rise of the network as rhetoric (85).

Burroughs understood the implications computing would eventually have for meaning making, whether that influence be explicit (using a computer) or implicit (being affected by other forces shaped by computing). He also drew attention not only to how a media being is a person fully engaged with networked rhetorics, but also to how institutional beings (governments, commerce, education) change within networks as each body is placed into a new type of relationship with the others.

Associations, combinations, and juxtapositions contribute to a methodology of connectivity. To work in the network, either to extend its functions or to resist its functions, as Burroughs advocated, means also understanding and learning this methodology. Previous work on intertextuality, the avant-garde, or Bakhtinian dialogue has touched upon this point, but never to the extent that networks currently do on the Web and in media life.

To call for the network is to reimagine English studies’ efforts to generate a twenty-first century focus. But what Burroughs imagined, David Bartholomae rejects, in his contribution to *Composition in the Twenty-first Century*:

Composition—or, the space within English studies where student writing is a central concern—is positioned to promote practical criticism because of its historic concern for the space on the page and what it might mean to do work there and not somewhere else. (17–18, emphasis mine)

The space of the page—whether practiced in composition or other areas of college English—is tied to the single author, the individual who works in one fixed space within a fixed disciplinary focus with a single identity tied to a singly motivated reading practice tied to a single idea expressed at a single moment. That is a concept already familiar to college English. The space somewhere else, which Bartholomae dismisses, is the open space constructed out of connections where multiple writers engaging within multiple ideas in multiple media at multiple moments function. That space somewhere else is the network. “Now we make our networks, and our networks make us,” William Mitchell argues (49). In that process of making networks, writers, through their work, see themselves connected to information in ways the space on the page does not allow. The space on the page keeps bodies of information (and, thus, bodies) separate. In contrast, networks alter current understandings
regarding how learning functions in social spaces. By social, I do not mean “people,” “friendliness,” or “mingling.” Instead, I mean the ways bodies of information socialize, the ways they interact, or, as Burroughs wrote, the ways they associate. Socialization is inherently neither a good nor a bad act; it is, instead, a process of working with information.

More is implied in such statements than collaboration or being online or even using a computer. A more complete understanding regarding how information connects in ways traditional English studies does not yet account for—the contradictory, overlapping, open, closed, and fluctuating systems of exchanges that networks create—is a challenge to the disciplinary identity of English as a field and to the identities that teachers and scholars in English embrace and request students to take on in their classrooms. With that last statement, I also acknowledge that working in and studying the network do not repeat the romanticized visions of hypertext and new media generated out of early 1990s scholarship. Networks are complex set-ups that can, as Jean-François Lyotard writes regarding database culture, appear paradoxical. He contends that whereas “established knowledge” situated learning in predictable and fixed ways, networks of ever-different data mean that knowledge will always be in flux (Lyotard 53). That one can study and work with a body always in flux, always unstable, and always shifting is a paradox because higher education has meant the mastery of a mostly stable body of information. Suggesting that college English engage with networks as both objects of study and as places to work within means accepting the difficulties networks create as they generate discourse. Because of the influence of new content, other ideas, and alternate places of meaning, a connection that exists right now might not exist later. The network, therefore, does not require learning the truths of ideas, but rather how ideas fluctuate in specific types of spaces and contexts. As Hayles argues, the deliveries of networked texts we experience “are never the same twice, for they exist in momentary configurations” (103).

In *A Teaching Subject*, Joseph Harris requests that English studies ask itself to rethink the identity of the student and the nature of student writing in terms of a greater intellectual project in which cultural and media influences are considered more seriously for the roles they play in writing. Harris encourages students to “think and write about the uses they make of the texts and discourses of popular culture, to consider the ways their sense of themselves as persons has been shaped in part by the music, movies, advertising, television, and fashion they look at and listen to every day” (19). Harris hints at the role networks play in shaping ideas. His model, however, is limited, in that it does not explore how connections arise out of specific areas (movies, business, advertising, fashion, and technology); or how these connections develop and change as they interact with other areas of knowledge acquisition and production; or how these connections complicate the very identity of any kind of study. Writing as network is a complicated act; the ways that networks structure
selves and rhetorical output still need unpacking and further study. Is the network a set of activities? Is it a practice? Is it an emerging body of work? Is it a type of linkage beyond hyperlinks? Is it the totality of all of these points?

Still, Harris provides us with a starting point for thinking anew about English studies and the teaching of writing. In the network model, emergence (or “growth,” as Barabási names this process) is vital to the metaphor of writing, so vital that it reconfigures that metaphor entirely. Growth has been absent within the previous metaphors of writing that college English has treated or even within the model Harris proposes. These previous models assume that objects of study and methods of study remain fairly consistent in light of technological change (this despite the question of “subjectivity” or role playing popularized in various theoretical texts and critiques). As Barabási notes regarding networks:

Despite their diversity most real networks share an essential feature: growth. Pick any network you can think of and the following will likely be true: Starting with a few nodes, it grew incrementally through the addition of new nodes, gradually reaching its current size. Obviously, growth forces us to rethink our modeling assumptions. (83)

How, then, do the connections encountered and constructed in any kind of information system of creation and distribution grow, rather than stay static? How does growth generate complexity, reflexivity, contradiction, ambivalence, redundancy, affect, and other features in emerging ways?

I ask these questions as I also ask, What should college English be? The questions are related. How can we rethink the model of English often assumed to be a consistent force (as opposed to a growing and emerging force) maintaining a steady presence from the late nineteenth century until today (even as new theories and movements like deconstruction, feminism, cultural studies, queer studies, etc. arise)? How can we rethink a model based on connections and linkages rather than on individual identities (as English itself and its areas of thought still propose to be)? How can we study and write with the nodes which shape complex modes of experience, nodes that are, as well, shifting with each connection and breakage they make? These are questions for a new definition of English studies. College English should be the intersection of the various areas of discourse that shape thought and produce knowledge. It should be the study of the mixing and remixing of connections: those connections that move from popular culture to the university, from geography to politics, from literature to film, from theory to theory, from celebrity to noncelebrity, from city to classroom, from the Web into our daily lives, from writing to writing. These items I list are not conclusive nor are they separate areas of thought we analyze and discuss; they are nodes in larger networks that are being reshaped with every connection we draw from one to another. They are the information spaces of
media beings. They are open places of rhetorical production. What should college English be? The network.

Works Cited


