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New-Media Scholarship: A Call for Research

Joseph M. Moxley

University of South Florida Department of English, moxley@usf.edu

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When print emerged, universities failed to recognize its importance and almost managed to marginalize themselves into oblivion. With a new major transition upon us, such benign neglect simply will not do. Yet the challenges universities face in responding to an increasingly digitized and networked world are staggering. Universities need a vision allowing them to express their dearest values in new forms, rather than protect their present form at the expense of their most fundamental values.

—Jean Claude Guédon, Conseiller, 1998

In Victor Hugo’s novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, set in 1482, the priest remarked “Ceci tura cela”: this book will destroy that building. He meant not only that printing and literacy would undermine the authority of the church but also that “human thought...would change its mode of expression, that the principal idea of each generation would no longer write itself with the same material and in the same way, that the book of stone, so solid and durable, would give place to the book made of paper, yet more solid and durable.”

What will be lost [in the late age of print] is not literacy itself, but the literacy of print, for electronic technology offers us a new kind of book and new ways to write and read. The shift to the computer will make writing more flexible, but it will also threaten the definitions of good writing and careful reading that have been fostered by the technique of printing.


As Jean Claude Guédon and Jay Bolter suggest, new technologies are extending the missions of universities and the work of academic researchers. In response to digital libraries, hypermedia, and new communication technologies, universities are struggling to re-conceptualize literacy, disciplinary knowledge, research methodologies, interdisciplinarity, and the faculty reward system.

Researchers interested in literacy and composition studies can and should play a leadership role in helping faculty and graduate students across disciplines navigate information resources, collaborate online, and find their voices as digital researchers and scholars. We need to understand better the resources that faculty and graduate students need to employ to publish effective multimedia research. We need to explore why more than half of the nation’s graduate students fail to reach the finish line while others take longer than necessary to complete theses and dissertations.

How can we support ABD (All But Dissertation)?
Change November/December 2001

This page contains an article discussing the evolution of writing tools and the impact of digital libraries on graduate education. The article highlights the importance of graduate programs in preparing students for the digital age, particularly in terms of their digital literacy and writing skills. It also touches on the role of technology in education and the need for universities to adapt to new learning environments.

Students' needs as writers: How do intellectual copyright issues impinge on e-publishing of research? What writing platforms are likely to be achievable in the years ahead? These questions are neither insignificant nor academic. Thanks to digital libraries, theses and dissertations have become more than an academic hurdle; they are now documents with the potential to reach millions of readers.

Graduate Education

As the popular press has frequently noted, technology is transforming society. Adults today face a constantly changing workplace, and technology is driving many of the changes. For example, in 1970, corporate spending on technology represented 5 percent of expenditures; in 1991, the figure had risen to 30 percent, and by 2000 it had reached 50 percent. Interestingly, it took 35 years for corporations to attain a 25 percent increase in spending for TV; 15 years for PCs, but only 9 years for the Internet. Just as paper was once ubiquitous, tools like Microsoft Office have now become commonplace. Being literate now involves much more than deciphering a bus schedule; nowadays, students must be facile at mastering new software.

Technology is exerting an equally powerful influence on graduate education and scholarship, altering how we converse, define, and publish knowledge. Thanks to technology, academics can share drafts of documents with students and colleagues over the Internet; they can use the Internet to retain the full text of their own work, so that the ideas and boundaries of the traditional linear text and one-inch margins can be integrated, animation, graphics, audio, and video.

Yet technology also threatens the very existence of traditional graduate programs. The rise of historically low unemployment rates (themselves substantially driven by the good economic times created by advances in the technology sector), there was a 1 percent drop in graduate enrollments each year between 1996 and 1998. Graduate education is still a booming enterprise: In 1998, approximately 420,000 students earned master’s degrees; 43,000 students earned doctorates; and 1.8 million students were enrolled in graduate programs.

But graduate education is changing much faster than ever before. Private industry now spends over $100 billion on corporate training. Online universities—like Utah Distance Learning Systems, the University of Phoenix, and, most recently, Harcourt Brace—challenge the authority and value of traditional universities. Like everyone else, research universities are struggling with what to provide for education, questioning how graduate programs can disseminate their knowledge to training students to use the new tools while still providing the comprehensive instruction students need in disciplinary knowledge and methodologies.

The creation of digital libraries of theses and dissertations (NDLTD) is one of the most significant and exciting recent changes that have occurred across disciplines in graduate education. The Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) archives bachelor’s and master’s theses in addition to dissertations. Presently, over 105 universities have signed letters of intent with Virginia Tech in building the NDLTD, and soon their students’ research will be available to graduate students and faculty at other institutions. Five universities require students to complete ETDs for graduation: Virginia Tech, West Virginia University, East Tennessee State University, the University of North Texas, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Florida. In May 2002, BYU will host NDLTD 2002. Previously NDLTD conferences have been hosted by Caltech, USF, and VT. Requiring courses of all graduate students, faculty, and libraries to electronic publishing. Electronic theses and dissertations enable a university to celebrate and distribute the intellectual products of its disciplines and to introduce its students to the “Knowledge Age.” Usage of the NDLTD is startling: in contrast to traditional print theses and dissertations, which average only a few requests each year, some of the popular research studies located at the NDLTD have been downloaded thousands of times.

Until Virginia Tech archived ETDs, few researchers requested VT’s theses and dissertations. Between 1990 and 1994, for example, only 3,967 theses were requested from VT’s 15,335 approved theses and dissertations. In contrast, in 1996, Virginia Tech received 25,829 requests for ETD abstracts and 3,561 access requests for 3,393 theses in its collection. (See VT’s down-load statistics at http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/data.) Clearly, the NDLTD improves worldwide access to information across disciplinary and institutional barriers. It enables students to distinguish themselves as creators and publishers of up-to-date significant content. In the days ahead, graduate students and researchers will judge a university by evaluating the quality of its virtual libraries of ETDs.

Now that access to graduate research has been so vastly improved, however, we must pay more attention to what graduate students need to know to become productive citizens. How do the NDLTD have put pressure on universities to evaluate the quality of graduate student writing. In the past, universities have overlooked graduate student’s and faculty members’ needs as writers by undertaking a simple process of recording thoughts rather than a powerful way to generate knowledge and learning. Instruction in writing focuses on discipline-specific training, often providing little support to improve written communication. Graduate students and faculty are well trained in the theories, practices, and research methodologies of their disciplines, but frequently not in the simple process of recording thoughts rather than a powerful way to generate knowledge and learning.

In addition, students can no longer prepare brief papers to code projects. They depend instead on extensive grants. What will they do when the slate is dropped and breaks?—1703 (Teachers’ Conference)

Students depend on paper too much. They no longer know how to write on a slate without getting dust all over themselves. What will happen when they run out of paper?

—1815 (Principal’s Association Meeting)

Students depend too much upon ink. They no longer know how to write on a slate without getting dust all over themselves. What will happen when they run out of paper?

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A Sample Research Study

M y colleagues and I—Terry Staggs, professor of media technolo-
gies; Bruce Cochrane, biology; Ilene Frank, library; Anita Callahan, engineering; and Rosann Collins, MIS—have been examining how Microsoft’s Office 2000 can be used to better support students’ needs as writers of multimedia scholarship, as well as faculty members’ needs as mentors of electronic theses and dissertations. Over the past two years, we have hosted workshops for graduate students providing them with Web space and training in using features such as Word’s Tracking. Commenting, and Researcher; Endnote’s “Cite While You Write.” We have presented to student models of online research and writing portfolios, models of ex-

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sions as sophisticated as those required by traditional prose. Plus, we need to teach our students to be critical of the tools of technology where appropriate, to question how they facilitate collaboration, mutual criticism, and debate or discussion. To
rent NDLTD library are traditional linear texts saved in Portable Document Format (PDF). Clearly, students and faculty need help to envision new thesis and dissertation genres... ways. To better meet faculty members’ and graduate students’ needs, we need to address the following research questions:

• What training and resources do universities need to provide to prepare students for the Knowledge Age?
• Who will establish standards for the appropriate processing and integration of knowledge from different sources, domains, and non-text media? What should such standards actually look like and how might they be established and promoted?
• Why do so few students and faculty make use of multimedia techniques that are crucial for clear expression in many types of investigations?

4) How Can We Advance the Campus Culture Through Academic Publishing?

Faculty and administrators need to work with one another and with software developers and publishers to investigate the effects of ETD initiatives on research methodologies, collaboration, mentoring, the academic reward system, and publishing practices. Some faculty—particularly those who dislike and distrust technology—may discourage their students from authoring new-media scholarship or from publishing their work on the Web. Others may embrace collaborative and multimedia authoring spaces, or may willingly serve on distance ETD committees. Related research questions are as follows:

• Will the increased access to graduate research created by digital libraries of ETDs result in more attention being paid to students’ needs as writers?
• How will digital libraries of ETDs affect how university dissertation committees are formed or how “defenses” are held?
• Will hiring committees and tenure committees value ETDs that are widely cited or downloaded?
• How can we work with colleagues and software developers to create worthwhile collaboration, multimedia, and authoring tools?
• What are the effects of ETDs on traditional publishing practices?

Conclusion

Until recently, few graduate theses or dissertations circulated past local libraries. Although the United States invests billions of dollars each year to support graduate research, most of the results of this research are communicated poorly. Over half of the students who begin doctoral work fail to complete the dissertation; and few studies benefit from the effective use of multimedia tools.

Yet we live in exciting times, revolutionary times. New authoring spaces created by the Internet, the NDLTD, and multimedia software are challenging our traditional conceptions of research and scholarship. Like Victor Hugo’s priest in Notre Dame de Paris, we know that dramatic changes are ahead. Thanks to information technology, faculty and graduate students can work collaboratively across geographical boundaries. Graduate students can use technology to defend proposals and dissertations, collaborate with each other and with faculty on group projects, incorporate interactive elements into their theses, and complete their dissertations without printing a word. Students can incorporate video samples of their research into larger documents or presentations. They can create poly-vocal case studies and ethnographies—that is, studies with alternative voices and interpretations. Similarly, in the quantitative realm, students can incorporate pivot tables that allow readers to see the effects of different sample sizes or alternative ways of viewing and interpreting data. Across disciplines, students can include links in their work that explain the significance of their research results to lay audiences. As interdisciplinary research becomes more common, graduate students throughout the world can co-author collaborative studies, using their respective disciplinary expertise to contribute appropriate components. Faculty, finally, might frequently serve on dissertation committees at universities distant from their home campuses.

These new ways of making meaning and collaborating in graduate work are evolving daily. In response, we need to re-articulate our programs, ensuring that we provide the training and resources students need to write well and to incorporate new-media scholarship. Unless we want to be overtaken by corporations and online universities, we cannot shut our eyes to the inevitable transformations created by information technology. We cannot be complacent with the past ways of shaping theses and dissertations. Instead, we must engage in serious reflection and must actively investigate the ways information technologies can influence research, composition, collaboration, and mentoring. And, using the results of such research, we must work to re-articulate our definitions of literacy and our roles as teachers, scholars, and researchers.

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