WRA 410 Final Exam: Advanced Web Authoring and the Professional Writer

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Franny Howes

Advanced web design, as a concept, is more than just the use of ever-more-advanced scripting languages, add-ons, and features for the web. It is, instead, a practice philosophically different from simple web design. Advanced web design consists of web authoring practices that are rhetorically aware, dynamic, and user-centered. Such practices are crucially based upon being conscious of one's audience and purpose. Since those concepts are a core part of the rhetorical approach, it is ideal to have a professional writer doing such work.

In the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric, the job of the rhetor is to discover all the available means of persuasion in any given case—that is to say, to identify and use every technique or approach that is appropriate to the situation (Poulakos and Poulakos, 1999). Now, the person composing nowadays is unlikely to be standing before a crowd engaging in forensic rhetoric, defending themselves or someone else against accusations of a crime, but the approach remains useful. Furthermore, the job of the writer is not always to persuade—however, the writer always has a purpose, whether it is to inform, to delight, to persuade one way or another, or something else. The writer also always has an audience—identifying them and their tastes is equally important. Thus, effective writing can be described as discovering all the possible techniques and approaches useful for one's rhetorical purpose and appropriate to one's audience, and employing them well.

In *The Elements of User Experience* (2003), Jesse James Garrett identifies the relationship between "site objectives" and "user needs" in the process of designing a smooth, successful user experience (p. 40). This book focuses on the idea of "user-centered design", which is certainly a core part of any conception of "advanced web design". Garrett, who is writing to an audience primarily composed of web developers, exhorts the designer to make both of these notions explicit and detailed. Frequently, an organization's goals for a web project are unspoken and may differ between team members. On the other hand, the imagined user for a project may be too simple and not take into consideration the variety of possible users and their needs.

This conception is directly analogous to the rhetorical notions of purpose and audience. A site's objective is its rhetorical purpose and its users are the audience. In order to create a successful web text, its author must have a sophisticated conception of their audience as well as a clear understanding of the purpose or purposes behind the creation of such a document. This type of thinking might be unfamiliar to a web developer. When writing code in a setting that doesn't demand rhetorical awareness, the main question is whether or not the code works. It is clear from Garrett's book that his audience is presumed to not know this approach. However, a professional writer is intimately familiar with this kind of thinking. Making the transition from thinking about audience to users is a very small step. A professional writer is ideal to do this kind of web design because this way of thinking is already internal to the work that they do.

How does the idea of "all the available means of persuasion" translate into web authoring terms? This might be misrepresented as the desire to have music on every page just because one can—the unnecessary use of many different kinds of web technology in

one page, with disregard to usability and design standards. This part of the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric is meaningless without consideration of audience. Being a practitioner of rhetoric is not just knowing all the devices that exist, but knowing all the devices or approaches that are *appropriate for your audience and purpose*. A web developing problem that is related to this ancient notion is "feature creep" or "scope creep". This term refers to the way some development projects slowly become larger, with the addition of features and parts, until they become unwieldy or difficult to manage (Garrett, 2003). Just because you *can* do something, does not mean that you need to or should include it in any given project. In web terms, this can be solved by having a clear concept of a project's scope, but in rhetorical terms, this still goes back to the notion of purpose. At the same time, this approach dictates that while you should not use every single strategy at once if they are not effective, you should have access to every strategy that *is* effective to reach each segment of your audience. The task of advanced web design, then, is to have access to all possible tools, and use the right ones for the job in the best way possible.

An additional core part of any definition of advanced web design is dynamism. A benefit of the technologies that are readily available to web authors right now is the ability to move beyond static, brochure-like presentations and into dynamic pages that can change in response to a user's actions, and present themselves differently to users with differing needs or preferences. These tools allow things like pages that transform for different audiences (Hart-Davidson, 2005) as well as page-based applications like Gmail that work from the document-object model, or DOM (Zeldman, 2007).

How is a professional writer potentially a better person than a web developer for using these dynamic web authoring tools in an effective way? The answer to this draws further from the ancient canon of rhetoric—this time, from the five canons of rhetoric, or parts of the process of creating a text. These canons are invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Poulakos and Poulakos, 1999). A rhetorically-aware professional writer is conscious of each of these parts of the composing process and how they can apply to the design of a website. This heuristic is an effective way of looking at the writing process as a whole, from the idea generation to the final presentation to the audience.

Content must be invented—the ideas have to come from the author's (or authors') head(s) before a project can begin. (This might be seen in a wire-frame or a design comp document.) The parts of a web document have to be arranged—put in relationship to each other, and organized in an effective way (clearly analogous to information architecture). The canon of style applies to the visual presentation of the site—in a standards-compliant project that separates content from form, this would be carried out by the aptly-named Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). The canon of delivery is the final presentation—how each part of the text works together as a whole to reach the audience. (The canon of memory, often called the "lost canon", is sometimes difficult to apply to modern writing, but it is certainly relevant to the storage and retrieval of data in an efficient way. For an excellent application of this canon to the content management process, see Whittemore (2008).)

Bill Hart-Davidson describes how this is particularly applicable to the problem of developing a site with multiple "views", or presentations of information for different

audiences, in his 2005 article "Shaping Texts That Transform: Toward a Rhetoric of Objects, Relationships, and Views". (In this case, he is discussing the role of professional writers in "single-sourcing" and the use of a content-management system to manage data for multiple outputs.) He describes how the transformation of a core set of information to serve multiple audiences is a rhetorical process, and that "creating effective structures requires the kinds of rhetorical expertise that technical communicators bring to the table" (p. 18). Yet, his article has a persuasive purpose— professional writers are not always educated on technical aspects of creating such transformative texts (database structures and implementation, content management systems, etc) despite the fact that they have an ideal theoretical base to do so very successfully.

Is it more effective to teach someone with the necessary set of tools a new philosophy, or to teach someone with an effective philosophy some new tools? Would it be easier to teach web developers to think rhetorically, or to teach writers who already have the rhetorical toolkit some of the tools necessary to compose dynamically for the web? Hart-Davidson makes the case for the latter, and such an argument is embodied by the Advanced Web Authoring course at MSU, WRA 410. My own past as a professional writer with workplace experience has shaped my opinion on this matter. In the two years I worked as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer doing communications work, I witnessed a woeful lack of rhetorical awareness, specifically of audience. This carried across all composing projects, be they emails, memos, websites, newsletters, grants, videos, posters, flyers, or anything else. These concepts are at the core of my pedagogical approach in my current employment as a writing teacher, and I see them as the

cornerstone to the work of a professional writer. Such an understanding can certainly be

taught, but those who already possess it are immensely valuable as communicators. Such

an understanding is much harder to measure than the number of programming languages

one knows or tools one can use. However, such tools are blunted if one poorly

understands *why* one is using them, and *for whom*, and to what end, and such

understanding makes a professional writer an effective, even ideal, practitioner of

advanced web design.

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