

## DIGITAL ENCULTURATION IN THE NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY CURRICULUM

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In less than a decade, the Internet has moved from the esoteric world of government-funded research to become ubiquitous for many millions of people around the world. A number of different factors have contributed to this phenomenal growth: government initiatives promoting education and access, the declining cost of computer technology coupled with a parallel increase in processing speed, and the Internet's commercialization being some of the more important ones. The growth of the Internet and the general rise in corporate utilization of information technologies have created a demand for workers that far exceeds the number of workers trained in these areas (Information Technology Association of America [ITAA], 1998). While it is out of the purview of this paper to go into the specifics of this gap, it is worth mentioning that the Information Technology Association of America commends the efforts of two-year degree granting institutions who have, *en masse*, responded to the Internet's growth with a range of new programs designed to give workers training and experience in applied computer and information technologies (ITAA, "Response," 1998).

Such responsiveness is in keeping with the pragmatic mission of the two-year college, to respond to regional workforce deficiencies with efficient and relatively inexpensive training programs (acknowledging, of course, the foundational component of each college's curriculum). However, I would like to suggest that new communication technology, especially those areas involved in such things as content development and interface design, poses a unique challenge to this paradigm. This challenge stems from a couple of basic facts. First, unlike all other vocational areas typically addressed by the two-year college curriculum, new communication technology interacts with popular culture in such a fundamental way that an understanding of this dynamic becomes a necessary component to any program designed for student success. Second, those embarking on careers in new communication technology will be contributing to the evolution of a brand new medium and must therefore possess the critical faculties necessary for active participation within a community of like-minded individuals. While the pragmatics of technology training will always remain at the forefront of the two-year curriculum, we must begin to ask ourselves if, in the special case of new communication technology, such an approach may deny our students access to the very discourse community to which they aspire. In this paper I would like to provide an analysis of this situation, arguing that the combination of traditional communication skills coupled with a knowledge of the history and culture of new communication technology not only affords our students a more complete understanding of their vocational field but also begins to address the issue of entitlement and the extent to which our students are able to become a voice of change in this rapidly changing discourse. I call this process *digital enculturation*.

Before I explain what I believe to be the most important aspects of digital enculturation, I would like to situate this discussion within the context of the community involved in the evolution of new communication technologies. John Brockman's (1996) term, *digerati*, is a useful starting point. For Brockman, the *digerati* consists of those communicators, technicians, and cultural workers at the vanguard of new communication technologies. They are, in his words the "cyber elite," who make their living thinking about and discoursing on the cultural and technological potentials inherent to new systems of communications. Consonant with other similar terms, such as *litterati* and *illuminati*, Brockman's *digerati* suggests a close-knit cadre, membership within which is regulated by a highly rarified, unwritten code of entitlement. The *digerati* are, for the most part, public intellectuals whose ability to speak about the emerging communication revolution, indeed, whose access to lines of public communication, is guaranteed by such things as their educational degrees, their status within the industry, and their

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ability to generate recognition from their peers. This last aspect should not be underestimated, for in Brockman's book, the digerati talk as much about each other as they do about new communication technology.

While the list of people profiled in Brockman's book are characterized first and foremost by their notoriety, people such as Howard Reinhold, Sherry Turtle, and John C. Dvorak, Brockman is careful to point out, that his list is "representative of a much larger group of cyber elite," who, together, "have tremendous influence on the emerging communication revolution surrounding the growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web" (p. xxxi). This statement is provocative for its ambiguity, raising the obvious question of just how closed the world of the digerati is. Brockman's allusions notwithstanding, I think the answer is fairly obvious. As painted by Brockman, the world of the digerati is absolutely closed to the vast majority of workers entering into the field of new communication technology. In a sense, the ideology of entitlement that functions to produce such a notion as the digerati runs counter to the democratizing effect some within the digerati, notably Howard Rheingold, suggest the Internet is capable of. At the same time, I believe having such a concept is important. However circumscribed by elitism, it has the potential to impart a sense of community to a group of disparate workers struggling with understanding their economic and cultural impact (and responsibilities) in a world in which all processes of everyday life are quickly becoming part and parcel to the digital domain. I would suggest, however, that as educators in new communication technology~ it is incumbent upon us to repurpose the concept so that it becomes inclusionary instead of exclusionary, wresting it from the elitism informing Brockman's work so that the technicians we train may add their voices to the conversation.

But why would we want to, especially when our task as educators within two-year degree granting institutions is largely determined by the acute and sometimes frenzied vocational aspirations of our students? This question is deceptively complex. For it is overdetermined at both the student and the institutional level by what I see as something like the *curricular ecology* of the two-year college. By curricular ecology, I mean to suggest a system within which a range of social, political, and institutional ideas are conserved through the implementation of various programmatic curricula. At the two-year degree level, this system is situated on an institutional terrain that privileges the pragmatic over the abstract, the vocational over the avocational. This is clearly demonstrated by the language used to define the various permutations of two-year degree granting institutions -- in Ohio, where I teach, these are Community Colleges, Technical Colleges, and University Branch Campuses. According to the Ohio Board of Regents the educational governing body in the state of Ohio, the main mission of a community college is to offer "pre-baccalaureate/transfer degree programs, career/technical education programs, developmental education, workforce training, adult continuing education, and community service activities (Ohio Board of Regents 1998, p. 201.01). Similar definitions apply to Technical Colleges and University Branch Campuses. By law and by custom, the vocationalism which governs the educational mission of these institutions is inherited by the programs which make up each institution's offering.

All of this is obvious. What is not so obvious are the subtle ideological contours endemic to the curricular ecology at Associate Degree granting institutions. For the purpose of this paper, the primary ideological effect of traditional vocational education is constituted at the level of discursive entitlement. The ability for a student to actively participate, indeed to effect change, within the discourse community of which she aspires to be a member is in direct correlation with the sheer quantity of education attainable. In other words, education becomes the hallmark of credibility. This is certainly one of the assumptions behind Brockman's account of the digerati and I believe holds true for all discourse communities in which the public voice is also an intellectual voice. Relatedly, this sense of entitlement also obtains at the very practical level of work within one's field. More education (not necessarily more vocational education) means being granted permission to register that education in a position higher than those with less education. I am being very simplistic here, for there are other factors that govern entitlement, not the least of which is the economic class out of which one obtains

education in the first place. However, I believe my point is clear -- the two-year degree granting institution does little in the way of instilling in its clientele a mode of entitlement necessary for active participation in the configuration of one's field or discipline. This is not its purpose.

To the extent that the ecology of two-year curricula is informed and maintained by educational objectives that have clear ideological effects on its students, I believe there are two major reasons for new communication technology programs to work against this grain and to reclaim social and cultural entitlement from the hands of the elite digerati, or at the very least, from the Bachelor's Degree program. Arguing from the vocational interests of our students the terrain of new communication technology is just as much informed by the workings of *communications* as it is by the technology that make such communications possible. Thus it is imperative that our students obtain proficiency in the critical understanding of the way images and text work together, their ideological effect on the media consumer, and the critical processes media workers go through in the creation of their product. Such knowledge begins with a thorough and theoretical examination of mass media and its social effects -- media literacy, as it were. Additionally, specific knowledge of the history and culture of new communication technology affords students the ability to construct their identities in relation to a discourse that does little in the way of differentiating between work and leisure. As Nicholas Negroponte (1995) has put it, "Computing is not about computers anymore. It is about living" (j). 5). In other words, for the digerati new media communications permeate all aspects of everyday life. And in a field that is characterized by radical change on a daily basis such immersion is essential for active vocational participation. If educators understand the important role media literacy and knowledge of the history and culture of new communication technology have in constituting a student able to participate fully in the field then the second reason for reclaiming the digerati will take care of itself. By shifting our perspective to consider these more abstract/avocational aspects of new communication technology, we are also doing our part to shift the whole structure of entitlement which currently disallows students such as ours from becoming active in the field's very discourse. This is because the ideology effect of such a perspective will be to produce a subject with background knowledge currently available only to those at higher levels of education. Hopefully, this will translate into a student more capable of participating *as a voice* in the communication revolution that is currently underway.

#### References

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