“Growing Smarter Over Time”: An Emergence Model for Administrating a New Media Writing Studio

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Abstract

This article reports on efforts to create an administrative structure for learning and teaching multimodal composing that depends not on the leadership of a new media writing expert but on the collaboration of relative novices organized according to principles of emergent learning. Based on four years’ experience in a grant-funded program that supports new media composing in multiple disciplines, I report on the benefits of a bottom-up, emergent approach while raising questions about the long-term sustainability of such an approach. I conclude by describing efforts to create more top-down support for new media composing, while remaining committed to serving the teachers and students who are the real agents of change.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, writing programs—once focused on print-oriented academic writing—are moving to adopt a new definition of writing that includes multimodal composing. In many cases, these new writing initiatives extend not just to first-year composition courses but to writing centers and writing across the curriculum programs as well. Responding to the burgeoning opportunities for composing in multiple forms outside of school, Kathleen Blake Yancey (2009), in her NCTE report “Writing in the 21st Century,” issued a “call to action, a call to research and articulate new composition,” identifying three primary goals: to “articulate the new models of composing developing right in front of our eyes,” to “design a new model of a writing curriculum K-graduate school” and to “create new models for teaching” (pp. 1–8). (See also Clark, 2010; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Faigley, 2003; Fleckenstein, 2003; Kress, 2003; Lunsford, 2006; Selber, 2004; Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004; Yancey, 2004.) An important question to consider is how to set about accomplishing such expansive goals especially in times when higher education is under economic stress.

Evidence that this call is being answered can be found in the increasing number of job descriptions asking for expertise in new media or multimodal composing. Unfortunately, that increase must be seen in the context of the dramatic overall decline in advertised positions in rhetoric and composition as well as English more generally (Modern Language Association, 2010). Clearly, to achieve widespread change in the kinds of composing students do, writing programs must go beyond hiring experts and find ways to encourage a large pool of teachers—adjuncts, graduate students, faculty from other fields, as well as those teaching writing across the curriculum (WAC)—to embrace this expanded definition
of writing regardless of their personal interest in or expertise with these new forms. And programs must do so at a
time when budgets are shrinking, and funding for what administrators see as non-essentials is being cut. In this essay,
I will report on how one program, the New Media Writing Studio <http://www.newmedia.tcu.edu/index.html>, has
attempted to address this challenge through a bottom-up, emergent approach to supporting multimodal composing,
an approach that focuses on developing shared expertise among relatively novice teachers and students. I will also
consider the difficulties of sustaining a program driven by teacher and student interests rather than institutional or
top-down priorities.

Like many technology initiatives, the New Media Writing Studio at Texas Christian University was born of opport-
unity rather than design. In 2005, at a time of economic prosperity, the university made available internal grants,
renewable for up to four years, for cross-disciplinary programs with the potential for transforming Texas Christian
University. As Director of Composition, I had repeatedly requested additional computer-supported writing classrooms
(we had only 1 for 50 sections of writing each semester); thus, when new grant money became available, my dean asked
me to write a proposal for “something with computers.” But, according to the terms of the grant, this “something” had
to be potentially transformative, and it had to benefit more than a single department. Though I’d had limited experience
with new media writing, I wanted to create a resource for teachers and students interested in exploring new forms of
composing. To meet this objective, the proposed program, named the New Media Writing Studio (referring both to the
work the staff would do and the space where we would do it), would support teachers and students doing multimodal
composing in any discipline.

Opened in the fall of 2006, the Studio, housing 22 computers equipped with Adobe’s Creative Suite, functioned
from the beginning as both an open lab and a classroom that could be reserved by instructors on a per-class meeting
basis. More than simply a space, the initial grant funded a staff of 5, drawn from tenure-track faculty, full-time
instructors, and graduate students in English who, in exchange for a course release, would consult with faculty interested
in developing new media writing assignments, offer workshops to classes and other groups, collaborate to create
pedagogical materials, design the Studio Web site, and manage the lab. Because staff members initially had only limited
experience with new media writing, one of our most important responsibilities was to increase our own understanding
of multimodal composing through practice, conversation, and research. To extend that learning outward, each summer
during the four years of the grant the Studio held a week-long faculty workshop, led originally by an outside expert
but eventually by staff members, as we became more skilled. In exchange for attending the workshop, participants
received copies of the Adobe design software available in the Studio, a small stipend, and support from Studio staff in
launching a new media composing project during the coming year; participants were then expected to report the results
of their project during the next summer’s workshop, thus continuing to feed new knowledge back into the program.

Although the Studio staff had a clear sense of mission—to support multimodal composing across the curriculum—we
were less clear about: (1) what “multimodal composing” would mean from semester to semester; (2) which faculty,
courses, or programs might want or need to do this work; and (3) what kind of support we could or should offer. Unlike
a composition or WAC program tied to clear curricular objectives, the Studio operated more on the fringes, aiming
to create faculty desire for pedagogical innovation rather than meet some preexisting need. Given the newness of our
enterprise, our limited experience, and the absence of an institutional mandate, our program structure needed to be
open and evolving, allowing the Studio to respond not only to changing technologies but also to the changing needs
and interests of our constituents.

2. Supporting multimodal writing across the curriculum

The challenges involved in establishing a program to support digital composing are not new. Whether it was creating
local area network classrooms and computer literacy classes in the 1980s, or, more recently, smart classrooms and
courses in digital storytelling, those committed to technology-rich writing programs have often had to struggle to secure
adequate resources. Although the initial cost of building such programs is one challenge, convincing institutions to
invest long-term in a new approach to teaching or learning presents another challenge. Furthermore, even when an
institution does sponsor a change initiative, faculty may be skeptical about whether such top-down initiatives are in
their best interest.

The importance of faculty involvement in programs aimed at changing teaching has been highlighted by numerous
scholars, especially those interested in technology-rich writing instruction. In Sustainable Computer Environments:
Cultures of Support in English Studies and Language Arts (2005), Richard Selfe drew on a survey “of 191 individuals
in 55 computer-using English departments” as well as his own 17-year experience (p. xi) in order to identify key features of an effective and sustainable program. In building such programs, although attention is often focused on acquiring and maintaining technology (hardware, software, network access, technical support), Selfe makes a case for focusing on creating an infrastructure of people, what he terms a “culture of support...an ensemble, team-driven effort that can help sustain the teaching of literacy in innovative, technology-rich environments” (p. 23). For Selfe, key features of a sustainable program include not just “robust and flexible digital environments” but “a team of interested stakeholders [who] meet on a regular basis” as well as “a team of teacher/leaders who are supported in their efforts and involved in shaping the culture of support,” for example, by leading workshops based on their own teaching experiences “that contextualize technology use” for specific courses and departments (p. 41). Selfe argued persuasively that while resources from the top are necessary to get a technology-rich writing program off the ground, it takes strong participation from the bottom for that program to have a widespread effect on teaching and learning.

Stuart Selber (2004), in Multiliteracies for a Digital Age, also identifies necessary conditions for the development of sustainable writing programs committed to advancing digital literacy. Like Selfe, Selber acknowledged the importance of bottom-up teacher involvement, but he also emphasized “the substantial amount of support teachers will need in order to be successful” and argued that such support must be deeply embedded in “institutional as well as departmental structures” (p. 224). Borrowing from the work of Donald Ely (1990), Selber highlighted some of the top-down support necessary. For example, he noted the importance of providing strong leadership: “Those who are centrally involved in the change process itself must have the requisite knowledge and skills needed to get the job done” and thus institutions must “be prepared to hire, retain, and value tenure-line faculty members whose primary scholarly work resides at the nexus of literacy and technology” (pp. 226–227). Other kinds of institutional support necessary include “sufficient time...for exploration and innovation” and “incentives...for the participants involved in change initiatives.” Selber emphasized that “computer literacy programs require significant, ongoing, expenditures” (p. 227) and reminded us that, for a program to be sustainable, this institutional support must be available long-term. Selber warned: “Change...is not something that can be achieved once and for all but must be constantly nurtured and tended, especially in schools where there is an inclination to reproduce the status quo” (p. 191).

The recommendations of Selfe (2005, 2007) and Selber (2004) on how to create and sustain computer-intensive writing programs bear a striking similarity to those made by advocates of WAC programs, which, like digital writing programs, are often viewed by institutions as beneficial but not necessary. Although programs like the New Media Writing Studio have the advantage of being the hip, new thing and thus may be more “fundable” in the short run—like WAC programs, new media writing programs can also be easily dismissed as an unnecessary enhancement that diverts limited resources. In “WAC Program Vulnerability and What To Do About It: An Update and Brief Bibliographic Essay,” Martha Townsend (2008) addressed the conditions that threaten WAC programs and identified characteristics of those that have weathered the storm.1 Not surprisingly, these characteristics include both top-down support and bottom-up participation—in Townsend’s words, “strong faculty ownership of the program” and “strong philosophical and fiscal support from institutional administrators, coupled with their willingness to avoid micromanagement” (p. 51). In reporting her findings, Townsend echoed much of the advice given by Selfe (2005, 2007) and Selber (2004): that buy-in from faculty stakeholders is crucial and that this buy-in depends on clear signals from the institution that it values these programs by providing adequate resources, making the programs a vital part of the curriculum, (through requirements, certificates, and so on), and assuring faculty that this work will be rewarded. As Townsend reminded, “If either faculty or administration is unwilling or disinterested, the WAC program will likely fail” (p. 51).

Given the New Media Writing Studio’s mission—to support multimodal composing across the curriculum—the recommendations of Selfe, Selber, and Townsend provide a useful blueprint for structuring our program: appoint a strong and experienced leader, secure a clear commitment from the top, make the program vital to the institution’s mission, identify and involve a broad base of stakeholders, insure adequate resources. Unfortunately, not all writing

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programs, let alone all technology-intensive writing programs, have these ideal conditions in place at the start. Our program certainly did not. Although we had received an internal grant, renewable for up to four years, there was no promise of funding beyond that point. In terms of leadership, while I had experience as a writing program administrator, I had almost no expertise with new media composing. And with only two weeks in which to write the proposal, there was little time to think through the infrastructure (both technical and personal) that would be necessary to maximize our chances of long-term success. Instead, after consulting with those I knew who would support the initiative, I sketched out a rough plan and trusted that we could figure out the details later.

3. Emergent learning

For an initiative like the New Media Writing Studio, the freedom to “learn by going where [we] have to go” (to quote the poet Theodore Roethke) had clear benefits. First, no one on the staff had done this kind of work before, so having the room to figure things out was especially important: we needed to learn to be new media composers even as we also had to learn how to support others’ learning. Second, by imagining the teachers and students we worked with as partners, the Studio’s capacity for learning was that much greater, and for those who chose to partner with us, so was their commitment to the enterprise. And, third, the speed with which communication tools and modes change necessitates openness in programs designed to foster new kinds of composing. Although at the beginning this open and evolving program structure seemed less like a choice than a necessity, the Studio staff, over time, came to identify strongly with this bottom-up approach as the best way to learn how to do the work of supporting new media composing.

Although the New Media Writing Studio was not consciously designed to emulate an emergent system (our position within an institution meant we could not be completely self-organizing), discussions of emergence have been helpful as we have sought to describe to ourselves and others how the Studio works. One such discussion can be found in Steven Johnson (2001), in his Emergence: The connected lives of ants, brains, cities, and software. Drawing on both scholarly and popular discussions of complexity theory, Johnson defined an emergent system this way:

In the simplest terms, they solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively stupid elements, rather than a single “executive branch.” They are bottom-up systems, not top-down. They get their smarts from below. In a more technical language, they are complex adaptive systems that display emergent behavior. In these systems, agents residing on one scale start producing behavior that lies one scale above them: ants create colonies; urbanites create neighborhoods; simple pattern-recognition software learns how to recommend new books. (p. 18)

The emergent systems that Johnson is especially interested in have “the distinctive quality of growing smarter over time, and of responding to the specific and changing needs of their environment” (p. 20). In simplest terms, an emergent system is one composed of many different participants whose unplanned interactions lead to an outcome that could not have been predicted, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Although early theorizing of complex systems arose from the hard sciences, more recently, theorists like the religion scholar Mark C. Taylor have applied complexity theory to humanistic concerns such as the nature of the self, network culture, postmodern art, and higher education (2001, 2009, 2010). In an interview published in a special issue of JAC focused on Taylor’s work, Taylor elaborated on the usefulness of complexity theory: “The ingredients of a new understanding of creativity can be found in the notion of complex adaptive systems. When extensively elaborated, the

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3 Each member of the initial staff (two tenure track faculty, two full-time instructors, and a graduate student) had minimal experience with Web design, image editing, or desktop publishing but had little or no experience teaching these skills to students or faculty.

interpretation of complex adaptive systems can be applied to everything from literary and artistic texts to biological and financial networks” (as cited in Rickert & Blakesley, 2004, p. 811). Given the capacity of complex systems to foster creative outcomes, Taylor is especially dismayed that universities are not designed to encourage such creativity. In particular, he sees the university’s traditional structure—“divisions that are structured hierarchically and linearly”—as incompatible with “digital space and network culture” where new knowledge is rapidly being created, arguing that “as the shape of knowledge changes, the structure of the university will have to change” (p. 811). More specifically, he posited a curriculum “structured like a hypertext rather than an assembly line. It will not be divisional, hierarchical, and linear but relational, distributed, and nonlinear” (p. 810). In an April 2009 op-ed piece for the New York Times, “End the University as We Know It,” Taylor drew on his earlier discussions of complex systems to make specific recommendations for changing higher education’s “emphasis on narrow scholarship,” insisting that “there can be no adequate understanding of the most important issues we face when disciplines are cloistered from one another and operate on their own premises.”

Although complexity theory has had its critics (Best & Kellner, 2000; Discenna, 2004), it has proven especially compelling to those working for educational change. An important insight for educational theorists is that, according to complexity theory, change happens not as a result of a grand plan dictated from the top, but in response to collective movement in a direction determined by participants. Although it is possible to instigate change by acting from the outside, the nature of those changes cannot be predicted or controlled since ultimately it is the collective of individual participants, responding to influences both outside and inside, that drives change. The issue for advocates of educational change thus becomes how to create conditions on the ground that will make change likely to emerge. According to complexity theory, these conditions include involving a large number of diverse participants, fostering multiple kinds of interaction, and providing for regular feedback. When applying complexity theory to human systems in contrast to natural ones, educational theorist Mark Mason (2008a) reminded us that one also must take into account individual participants’ “conscious intentionality” (p. 39). In other words, participants’ interests and motivations are an important factor determining the direction a group will take.

4. Organizing emergence

From the beginning, the New Media Writing Studio staff agreed that defining our work and deciding how it would get done would be undertaken collectively rather than by a designated leader. We also agreed that staff members would share roles as much as possible. In practice, this meant that each staff member, from graduate student to tenured faculty member, worked in the lab ten hours a week and had essentially the same responsibilities: to learn more about new media composing and share that knowledge with the group, to provide lab support to students and faculty, to create teaching materials, and to offer workshops. Working according to these principles helped align the Studio with principles of emergence. According to Mark Taylor (2001), the traditional approach to education that focuses on hierarchy and specialization should be reorganized instead into a “web of nodes” which is “radically decentralized” and where “operations do not have to be ordered sequentially but can run in parallel” (p. 155). Because each Studio staff member participated in all aspects of the Studio’s work, opportunities for learning by the group were multiplied. This collective knowledge-making is a key feature of emergent learning. In “What Is Complexity Theory and What Are Its Implications for Educational Change?,” Mark Mason explains, “The whole becomes, in a very real sense, more than the sum of its parts in that the emergent properties and behaviors are not contained in or able to be predicted from the essence of the constituent elements or agents” (2008a, p. 37).

In addition to shared roles, a second principle guiding the New Media Writing Studio’s work was maximizing opportunities for communication. As Steven Johnson (2001) explained, a system made up of a variety of individuals with limited expertise can grow complex only if the system allows frequent interaction among participants (p. 78). During the first year of operation, the Studio staff held weekly staff meetings to reflect on the week’s work, discuss ongoing projects, plan future activities, and revise our individual and group processes for meeting our objectives—objectives that were also revised along the way. In addition to our face-to-face staff meetings, we made extensive use of a group e-mail address and shared network drive, not only to learn from each other about doing new media composing but also to make decisions collectively. Should teachers be able to reserve the Studio for classes when students needed to use it as a lab? Should we spend our time creating project-specific support materials for software or direct students to general tutorials already available? How can we capture, store, and reuse knowledge we make each time we help a class or teacher? Deciding how to answer these questions depended explicitly on hearing from everyone and then moving
forward. Though it might have been more efficient for a leader to make policy decisions (and there was sometimes tension as staff members came into conflict or struggled to be heard), the benefit of this more open, bottom-up approach to program development was the ability to grow in unanticipated directions and a strong commitment to getting there together. Another strategy that encouraged regular communication was that lab schedules were set up to allow for some overlap (one staff member working 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. and another working 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.) so that there was time to talk to each other about ongoing lab activity, to pass on work, and to collaborate on projects. Key to emergent learning is the habit of paying attention to those around you in order to glean information about current conditions. As Johnson (2001) claimed, “Local information can lead to global wisdom” (p. 79). Educational theorist Mark Mason (2009) also emphasized that “educational and institutional change is less a consequence of effecting change in one particular factor or variable, and more a case of generating momentum in a new direction by attention to as many factors as possible” (p. 121). Momentum can be created only through frequent communication among participants. We needed a sense of all being on the same page. Our extensive interaction ultimately resulted in each of us knowing more—and the program as a whole having more to offer—than if staff members simply contributed their individual expertise.

The principle of non-hierarchical sharing of work along with a focus on extensive communication led naturally to frequent collaboration. For example, most workshops were organized and led by multiple staff members, which resulted in our offering fewer workshops in a year but yielded more learning as each of us challenged ourselves to teach new skills (digital portfolio composing, video composing, presentation design) with the help of our colleagues. We also collaborated with campus entities such as the Center for Teaching Excellence (which offered expertise such as training faculty and teaching with technology) and the Center for Instructional Services (which loaned equipment to faculty) as well as faculty in Journalism and Interior Design (who taught courses in using design software.) As educational theorist Mark Mason (2008a) concluded, educational change depends not just on “rich, exponentially generated connectivity among constituent elements,” but also on “the diversity of the constituent elements” (p. 39). Although principles of emergent learning make such collaboration seem natural, Mark Taylor (2009) observed that the traditional organization of universities into strictly divided disciplines mitigates against collaborative work. Indeed, our College of Communication (which houses the journalism program) eyed our efforts suspiciously, questioning why we were using the term “media” and intimating to our dean that we were duplicating their program, which raised funds to develop a Media Convergence Lab a few years after our Studio opened. Even though the College of Communication’s new media writing classes are not available to non-majors, their labs are not open to the general student population, and there is no faculty support (several instructors in the journalism department enrolled in our summer workshop), our work was seen as an infringement on their territory. Only by inviting individual faculty members to share their expertise with us and by demonstrating that our mission was not to create a competing new media fiefdom but to support students and faculty who did not have access to these new forms of composing were we able to get around these institutional constraints.

Let me illustrate how these principles of shared work, extensive communication, and collaboration fostered emergent learning for staff members with an example from my own experience. Of all the Studio staff members, I knew the least about new media composing. I nevertheless agreed to offer a workshop on developing digital professional portfolios with a primary audience of graduate students. In doing so, I clung to the idea articulated by Steven Johnson (2001) that “ignorance is useful” (p. 78). More specifically, ignorance of the larger view can help participants pay close attention to their immediate surroundings and focus on learning what they need to know at the moment. As Johnson explained it, “Emergent systems can grow unwieldy when their component parts become excessively complicated. Better to build a densely interconnected system with simple elements, and let the more sophisticated behavior trickle up” (p. 78). As Director of Composition, I had offered workshops on teaching portfolios and had a dozen years’ experience mentoring graduate students on the preparation of job search materials, but I had never developed a professional Web site myself. My co-leader for the workshop was a faculty member with Web design experience. He had taught the English Department’s senior seminar, which required English and Writing majors to construct professional portfolios using Adobe Dreamweaver. Because we knew that Dreamweaver was not readily available to graduate students except in the Studio, we wanted to offer some easy alternatives for putting materials online. Based on advice I received from

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5 This faculty member was hired by the university two years after the Studio program began and was not an official staff member, though he volunteered his time to attend staff meetings and to help with projects such as this workshop.
a variety of sources, I set about learning (so that I could teach) the basics of using various Web sites, and, in particular, the blog publishing site WordPress <http://wordpress.com/>. I also worked my way through my co-leader’s directions for setting up a Web site in Dreamweaver so that I could help answer questions. Even with this preparation, I was operating on a fairly limited knowledge base, teaching workshop participants how to do something I was still learning myself. Admittedly, doing so was difficult, even more so when I offered the workshop to other faculty. First, I had to be open to learning and willing to expose myself as a novice—I had to give up the authority I usually had as an expert in my field. And, second, I had to be willing to position myself as a co-learner with others; I had to actively invite others to help me learn. As Debra Journet (2007) pointed out, this discomfort with being a novice can be one of the greatest impediments to change among experienced faculty. And, yet, my ignorance was useful in that I could identify with other faculty who might similarly feel reluctant to learn how to do something new. If I could learn, so could they.

This approach to learning—based on extensive communication with an expectation that such communication would lead to change—also extended to the development of program policy. Openness to change is one of the key features of emergence, as Mark Taylor (2001) described it: “For complex systems to maintain themselves they must remain open to their environment and change when conditions require it” (p. 156). One change in administrative policy that emerged over time had to do with our approach to teaching software use. In the beginning, we wanted to ease faculty fears about offering instruction in software by being willing to step in and provide that instruction ourselves. Through regular discussion in staff meetings and e-mail, we came to agree that such an approach was unsustainable; on a practical level, if we wanted to spread opportunities for new media composing across campus, the Studio alone could not be responsible for delivering software instruction to students. And, pedagogically, there were also limits to how effective new media composing instruction could be for students without a faculty–Studio partnership. For example, a fine arts professor asked the Studio to offer a workshop for his graduate students on creating digital portfolios, but then did not respond to requests for further information and simply dropped off his students at the appointed time, leaving the workshop leader to guess what his students needed to learn. A different kind of problem occurred when faculty chose not to invite our participation. For example, a Spanish instructor who had taken the summer workshop confidently informed us, mid-project, that she had assigned her 75 students to produce 5–7 min videos, and admitting, when pressed, that she had not considered whether students had access to video cameras and had not planned to provide instruction in Microsoft Windows MovieMaker or Apple iMovie, assuming that students could learn on their own. Both of these experiences exemplify the normal way learning is organized in the university: an expert delivers instruction or individuals learn on their own. Our model for learning was decidedly different. As we say explicitly on our Web site: “The NMWS is a center of emergent expertise. We believe if we each learn a little and share what we learn, collectively, we can do a lot.”

This approach to learning—together and from the bottom-up—informs one of the most important features of the New Media Writing Studio’s program: the weeklong faculty workshop, offered each summer during the four years of the grant. Like everything else about the Studio program, the summer workshop evolved based on experience, feedback, and changing conditions on the ground. For example, whereas early workshops were led by outside experts, the most recent workshop was led by the Studio staff. This change demonstrates both staff members’ increased facility with supporting faculty and our commitment to a bottom-up rather than top-down model of learning. Arguably, by inviting an outside expert to lead the workshop, we conveyed to participants that new media composing was the purview of experts; by leading the workshop ourselves (with the help of past participants), we were able to model the learning approach on which the Studio program was based.

In an effort to give faculty hands-on practice with new media composing, during the five days of the workshop, participants created a blog (where all subsequent workshop activities would be posted and reflected on), designed a header for their blog using Adobe Photoshop, created a slideshow with found images, conducted a brief video interview of another workshop participant that was posted to their blog, and ultimately composed a short video to share on the final day of the workshop. We told participants up front that although admission to the workshop required that they propose a new media composing project that they planned to pursue in the upcoming year, we would not be focusing on their projects but would instead be focusing on a process of learning. In this context, no one was an expert and everyone was dependent on the group. By providing opportunities for faculty to learn together, we were responding to scholars such as Dorit Maor and Simone Vole (2007) who found in their study of media professionals who failed to complete an online professional development program that “independent learning may not be the preferred mode of study for professionals” (p. 113). Stephen A. Bernhardt and Carolyn S. Vickrey (1997) also concluded that “faculty and students need to learn to
work with computers within social environments, as part of teams. The diverse skills and aptitudes represented on teams can save one from needing or trying to know everything about computers” (p. 336). In addition to easing the burden of needing to learn “everything,” opportunities to work collaboratively make it easy for faculty to share ideas. As Bernhardt and Vickrey remarked, “Inspired uses of technology grow as the learning community grows. . . Teachers can begin to imagine new ways to alter or enhance their classroom activities based on the success stories shared by colleagues” (p. 349).

Indeed, the benefits of the summer workshop cited most often by participants seem directly linked to the principles we used to facilitate emergent learning. Participants enjoyed working with faculty from other disciplines; they enjoyed the camaraderie that developed as they depended on each other to figure out how to do something new; and they found that what they learned about learning was as or more important than gaining facility with specific new media composing tools. These benefits extended beyond the summer workshop as faculty partnered with us to implement projects in their courses. For example, Sandy, a staff member in the School of Nursing who provided academic support to at-risk nursing students, was eager to offer her students a composing experience similar to the one she had enjoyed in the summer workshop. Sandy’s participation in the workshop was especially valuable to her because, as she described it, her status as staff rather than faculty (and the only non-nurse in the Nursing School) left her feeling isolated. On the last day of the workshop, she acknowledged that this was the first opportunity she’d had to feel included among faculty. This experience of inclusion, she believed, would likewise benefit her students, who in order to increase their own success needed not just to improve their study skills but also to identify with their more successful peers and to feel like valued members of the School of Nursing. In the past, Sandy had asked struggling students to interview a successful senior nursing student and to write a report on the student’s success strategies. Because of her experience in the faculty workshop, Sandy saw video composing as a way to help her students have more creative involvement in the interview assignment and, just as important, to be able to make the students’ success strategies public.

This emphasis on emergent learning—going forward without knowing, on making use of available resources, on sharing knowledge for the good of the group—extended to how the Studio helped students in the lab. When a student asked a question I couldn’t answer, I would direct the student to use the Help tab or do a Google search while I sent e-mail to the Studio staff and consulted print and digital resources. By doing so, we were modeling the basic truth about technology-rich composing (perhaps all composing): that no one ever knows everything and that what is most important is having a strategy for learning. Here, again, having a group e-mail address helped facilitate the communication that fosters emergent learning. When I sent an email asking the group how to do something, responses came back to the whole group, meaning everyone could learn. And, it was the staff’s commitment to learning and our acknowledged dependence on each other that motivated us to read and respond to those e-mails.

There is one final way the New Media Writing Studio attempted to foster an emergent approach to learning and that is by providing additional feedback loops through our recent Re:Creating Writing Celebration. While there is nothing new in staging writing contests or planning teacher roundtables, in organizing our Celebration, the Studio consciously sought to extend learning both outward and back to the Studio. As Mark Taylor (2001) pointed out, “Complexity is directly related to connectivity. As connections or interconnections proliferate, complexity expands and, correlative, information increases” (p. 139). For example, to solicit student submissions for the Web site/blog and video/presentation contests, the Studio not only advertised in places students were likely to congregate, but we contacted every teacher who had worked with the Studio in the past four years and invited them to identify students who had done especially good work. Studio staff then contacted students and let them know their teachers had recommended that they submit to our contests (faculty also contacted students directly). In this way, the Studio became more aware of the kind of work that students were doing and (with permission) could show that work to teachers, administrators, and guests of the university. Similarly, the teacher roundtable at the Celebration, during which faculty members from departments such as German, Religion, English, and Economics described their experiences with new media writing in their classes, provided an opportunity for those faculty members to feed their learning back to the Studio and out to a more general audience (which included faculty from other universities in the region as well as faculty from our own campus who had not yet worked with the Studio). Everyone who attended the roundtable received packets of assignments, and the pedagogical material was also made available on our Web site in order to foster a continuing growth of knowledge within the Studio, the campus community, and beyond.
5. The costs of emergence

After four years of working from the bottom-up to support new media composing, what have we learned about the benefits of such an approach? First, while there is no question that the initial outlay of resources from the top (space, equipment, course releases, operating expenses) was essential to jumpstart the New Media Writing Studio, just as important was the freedom to grow based on the evolving interests of participants. Because we did not know enough in the beginning to focus or limit our efforts, we ended up going in unanticipated directions (composing with video was not even on our radar when we wrote the initial grant proposal), which resulted in more learning for all of us and an openness toward change that seems crucial in programs that support new forms of writing. Also valuable was the experience of being uncertain beginners who were committed to learning together; though it challenged our academic identities as experts, embracing our roles as novices helped us model for others how to take the risks that are involved in investing in new media writing.

Our approach also allowed us to foster desire for new kinds of teaching and composing in programs and departments that we would not have thought to target. In four years’ of summer workshops, the Studio provided professional development to faculty from art history, education, English, environmental studies, French, German, interior design, journalism, kinesiology, nursing, religion, social work, Spanish, and theater. Staff members from the Honors College and writing center also attended. In addition, through informal consulting, the Studio has supported new media projects in sociology, marketing, and e-business. A wide variety of students seem also to have benefited. The fact that we were able to hold a contest that culminated in a public display of student work confirmed for us that a variety of new media composing is going on all over campus.6 We also succeeded in developing a core group of faculty who use new media composing in multiple courses and support our efforts in numerous ways. Cynthia, an instructor in German, has moved from asking beginning German students to make brief videos on any subject to assigning advanced German students to produce videos on some aspect of German culture, which she then uses when she teaches subsequent courses. Students who take the full sequence of German courses can build on their new media composing skills from semester to semester. Steven, a tenured economics professor, initially paired students in his senior seminar on the economic crisis with students in a multimedia composing course to produce Web sites intended to share his students’ research with a wider public (see <http://www.economicsforeveryone.ca/>). In subsequent semesters when the multimedia composing course was not being taught, and determined not to give up the assignment, he asked students to produce the Web sites themselves with the help of a graduate assistant. Both Cynthia and Steven were featured speakers at the Re:Creating Writing Teacher’s Roundtable, serving as excellent models of how to approach the learning of new media composing: start where you are, make connections, see where things go. Cynthia will also serve as co-leader of an upcoming workshop, sponsored by the Studio, offered to local high school language teachers who want to learn more about using multimedia composing in their classes.

Our way of working collectively and expecting faculty who use our services to feed knowledge back to the group has definitely helped sustain and extend our influence. Indeed, faculty members who have used our services, especially participants in our summer workshops, are the best ambassadors for the Studio and for new media writing more generally. When Sandy, the nursing instructor, heard that at the end of our grant period we would not be receiving operating funds from the university, she immediately sent an e-mail to the provost telling him how vital the Studio had been to her teaching. Other faculty members have vocally supported us to the dean and the chancellor. These faculty have a sense that the New Media Writing Studio is a program designed primarily to support them in their desire to do new and creative teaching, and they are willing to work to see it continue.

Our emergent approach to supporting new media composing across the curriculum has also faced challenges. While there were clear benefits to the staff sharing roles in terms of the amount of information we could exchange and the subsequent learning we could do, the fact that each of us, from graduate assistant to tenured professor spent time answering e-mail, helping students in the lab, consulting with faculty, and offering workshops was, at times, inefficient. Eventually, while we continued to share lab supervision and workshop leading, some differentiation of roles did emerge. Managing clerical tasks such as scheduling and answering e-mail fell to the graduate assistant, while updating the Web

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6 Winners of the www contest included a graduate student in journalism for his blog about the effects of new media and an interior design student who submitted her professional portfolio. Winners of the video contest included a student who created a personal reflection video on the impact of 9/11 and a group of students who wrote, acted, and directed a 10-min telenovela in Spanish.
site became the responsibility of one of the instructors, who taught himself the language of Cascading Style Sheets in order to redesign the site (and improve his teaching of Web design). As the nominal director, I met with the dean and fundraisers for the college, which meant I had more opportunities than others to shape program development. While such role definition improved efficiency, it also meant each of us limited our opportunities for learning.

Another challenge to our principle of shared roles was the pressure staff members felt to get credit for their work—a byproduct of the way work is rewarded in the university. Graduate students need to be able to martia their experience on their vitae. The recent creation of a promotion ladder for full-time continuing instructors means that they, too, need clear ways to document their time spent in the Studio. And it goes without saying that tenure-track faculty feel pressure to accumulate evidence of individual accomplishment and professional recognition, which is particularly difficult when those faculty are not experts in new media. Studio work clearly counts as service, but in a Ph.D.-granting department such as ours, service counts little for those on the tenure-track. And while the Studio provides opportunities for teaching, that teaching is difficult to document. Indeed, one tenure-track colleague chose to volunteer in the Studio rather than accept a course release since student course evaluations would “count” more toward tenure. While the Studio program embraced shared work, the larger institution in which we were situated did not. Educational theorist Mark Mason (2008a) acknowledged the important role that power plays in complex systems like school, defining power as “the directional course of the phenomenon that enjoys the dominant inertial momentum over other competing phenomena” (p. 40). As a program focused on emergent learning, the New Media Writing Studio was hardly dominant in the context of the university. Indeed, we were swimming against the tide.

Faculty who participated in our summer workshop or sought our help for new media projects in their classes also expressed concern about how this work would “count.” Because our summer workshops were open to any level of instructional staff, we regularly had participants who were adjuncts, instructors, professional practice faculty or staff with some instructional responsibility. For these instructors, it was often reward enough simply to enhance their teaching, since doing so would improve the likelihood of their continued employment. Untenured faculty, in contrast, worried about the amount of time it would take to learn to teach new media composing to their students as well as the risks of not doing it well. Although our institution values teaching, few untenured faculty have the luxury of investing a lot of time in pedagogical innovation, especially if it is not clearly related to their career profile. Similarly, tenured faculty who often sought out the summer workshop because they were ready to do something new had habits of working that made them cautious about spending time without a definite pay-off—personally, professionally, or institutionally.

Across most disciplines, the professional rewards for new media composing are generally few. In interviews I recently conducted with faculty who have participated in New Media Writing Studio programs, virtually all noted that while new media composing is beginning to be used for teaching in their fields, it has been rarely used for reporting research beyond the occasional Microsoft PowerPoint presentation; instead, scholars were/are expected to produce conventional, print-based articles and books even when new media forms were more appropriate or could reach a wider audience.7 Mark C. Taylor (2001) suggested, “When ‘writing’ assumes new forms, the difference between publication and teaching no longer remains stable” (p. 258). Though that is likely true, until more scholarship is composed in multimodal forms, faculty will continue to experience a disconnect between the texts they produce and those Yancey (2009) claimed teachers ought to help students produce—those with cultural currency. Indeed, Taylor (2001) reminds us that “the value of publication...follow[s] the inverse economic logic we have discovered in art: the more popular and profitable the work, the less its academic value (p. 249). If a scholarly work is seen to be accessible or useful to the public, it will automatically be considered less valuable than scholarship written in a less accessible form for a narrow audience. Such valuation persists, even though technological developments make expanded ideas of scholarly contribution increasingly viable (Graupner, Nichoson-Massey, & Blair, 2009, p. 20) and in spite of a recent call by Sidonie Smith (2010), President of the MLA, for fostering alternative forms of dissertations beyond the monograph. While in numerous institutions, including my own, new Ph.D.s now submit digital versions of their theses and dissertations, the texts they write rarely exhibit the multimodality that is already possible. As Graupner et al. (2009) observed, “with no rhetorical models and mixed messages on incentives and rewards for producing digital

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7 One tenured associate professor of history described seeing at a conference an interactive map created by an assistant professor and graduate student who admitted that they did not expect the work to count towards tenure: an untenured interior design professor who had been doing video interviews with design professionals and posting them to a Web site reported that she’d been told by her department to focus on publishing peer-reviewed articles. The one exception was Harriet, a professor of social work, whose research involved producing videos of Holocaust survivors.
Clearly, then, those committed to expanding writing programs to include multimodal composing must consider how to achieve much wider changes within university culture, at the bottom, at the top, and across institutional boundaries that divide faculty and administration, research and teaching, the academic and the popular. Taylor warned, “To survive in network culture, humanists cannot do the same thing differently but must do something different” (as cited in Rickert & Blakesley, 2004, p. 819). Creating momentum in the direction of “different,” however, remains a challenge. Because the New Media Writing Studio focused on working locally with individual faculty who sought our help, we did not spend time or energy nurturing support from the administration. And because we did not make ourselves important to those in control, at the end of four years of grant funding, the New Media Writing Studio was not absorbed into the university’s operating budget. Currently the Studio remains on the fringes, left to plan programming with 4% of our original budget.8

One way in which the New Media Writing Studio has grown smarter after four years of supporting new media composing with an emergence-oriented approach is with the realization that, in order to gain power, we need to find ways to align our interests with the interests of those in power. Toward that end, we are offering workshops to the community and seeking grant funding to support that outreach—something our dean values. We are also exploring the possibility of offering students a certificate in new media writing that they can earn by taking core courses with a new media writing component. Once the Studio is providing a service that is institutionally necessary, we can make a more convincing argument for long-term funding. We have also learned that to effect meaningful and lasting change in how writing is defined and taught will require critical mass: widespread participation not just within a program like the New Media Writing Studio but across the institution. Thus, we must look for programs, departments, and faculty with whom we can increase our influence rather than waiting for interested parties to come to us. Mark Mason (2008a) concluded that when a complex system experiences multiple directional pulls:

Which possible outcome is realized... is a question of intervention at as many levels as possible: at the macro-structural level, at the intentional human agency level, so that sufficient momentum is generated in a particular direction to displace the inertial momentum of the current dispensation and to create a dominant inertial momentum of the desired policy. (p. 42)

In other words, we need to continue to attend to the bottom (the human agency level) but also to the top (the macro-structural level). To turn the boat around will require many oars moving in the same direction. While the task is daunting, it is important not simply to wait for the tide to turn, but instead to set to work changing course, many oars at a time, starting with our own.

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References


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8 The grants began in a period of institutional prosperity. Increases in applications, enrollment, and tuition had allowed the university to extend resources to programs that offered enhancements (even potential transformation) but were not necessary. When the economy collapsed and our endowment declined, the institution was lucky not to face deep cuts but nevertheless could no longer afford to fund non-essential programs.