

ACTIVITY 2

MATERIALITIES OF WRITING

TEACHER NOTES

GOALS

I use the various exercises of this activity because they encourage people to see the technologies we use for writing and how those technologies take part in shaping what we communicate. These exercises can help people to see how the designs of writing technologies not only encourage certain kinds of writing but that they also enfranchise some while disenfranchising others.

TIME

These exercises can be done as in-class work or as homework followed by in-class discussion.

LEVEL

I've used these activities with entering undergraduate students and with graduate students in classes where we are considering writing as a technological and more broadly material practice.

NOTE

These activities can be useful for beginning longer research explorations into the materialities of writing and/or seeing, because they can add concreteness to the explorations: when we see how something we had taken for granted as a simple tool has come to be designed in ways that disenfranchise some or that support only certain kinds of work, we tend to be more alert to how we use—and teach about—it.

EXERCISES

COLORFUL HANDWRITING ...

Give students a short (1-2 page) writing assignment—and then ask them to turn in the assignment written in crayon (any color or colors) on any paper.

After they are finished, ask them what was different about the process of writing with crayon as opposed to pen or keyboard. What felt different as they wrote? Did they find themselves thinking differently? Did they come up with ideas they might not have had otherwise, or did they find themselves dropping out ideas because the actual writing was tedious or uncomfortable?

Ask them to look at all the pages made by all the different people in class. What adjectives do they apply to the way the various pages look? That is, do the pages look serious or refined or goofy or childish or unprofessional or creative? What qualities of the pages suggest the adjectives they name? How do they think they learned to have such responses to these texts?

Ask them to imagine a culture that had only crayons as writing implements. How do they think that culture would differ from ours? What do they think that culture would be most proud of, or would consider to be signs of intellectual prowess?

What general observations about writing implements and bodies do they want to venture, based on this? What general observations about writing implements and thinking do they want to venture?

SEEING (A PART OF) THE LITERATE WORLD

For everyone in class to see, hold up a typical print text used in your class: this could be a paper produced by someone in class or a book chapter or a journal article. Ask what someone needs to know in order to *read* the text, and have another person record the list. The list ought to end up longer than anyone expects: in addition to knowing the language the text is written in, and the various conventions of its genre, the list could include knowing what is right-side up for a page, how to turn pages, how not to expect print on the back of a page (in the case of a class paper), or what the page numbers indicate. You can prompt people by asking them to remember lessons on reading in their early years of schooling or to remember a time when they had to ask someone else to explain something they didn't understand about how to use a book. You can also ask them to imagine that they needed to help a visitor from another planet understand how to move through the text.

Then ask what someone needs to know to *produce* such a text. Again, keep a list.

Ask how they learned the things that are on the lists. In what were they given direct instruction? What did they pick up through personal observation? Why do they think their formal education only addressed some of the things they need to know in order to be able to read these texts?

Ask students to estimate how much time they've spent in their lives learning to read the kinds of texts you're discussing. Why do they think they have been encouraged to put so much effort into learning to read and write?

Ask students to imagine that they'd spent as much time learning to draw or to manipulate photographic images. What do they think their attitudes toward drawing or photographs would be? How might our texts be different?

REDESIGNING WRITING "TOOLS"

Divide the class into groups of 2-3, and give each group one of these prompts:

- Redesign the desktop computer as though no one on the Earth had eyes.
- Redesign the desktop computer as though everyone in the world used their eyes and noses and ears in the same way as cats and dogs do... (Choose either cats or dogs as a model.)
- Imagine you wake up one morning and find yourself—and everyone else in the world—with the body of a giant cockroach. Redesign the desktop computer so that everyone can use it with their new bodies.

They should sketch out their re-designs, and prepare to present their responses to others. (Their re-designs do not have to be fancy, but should indicate the most important changes they would make.)

After they present their re-designs to each other, ask students to consider what sight helps us know (things at a distance, for example) as opposed to senses like touch (which require closeness) or smell (which does not give us a sense of sharp boundaries between objects, as sight does). How do they think their relations with other people would be different if sight were not so emphasized in our communications?

The exercise can help them think about just how much computers—including monitors, keyboards, joysticks, and mice—have been designed to emphasize sight instead of other senses, and have been designed to fit individual bodies with hands and arms and backs that work in certain ways. The exercise can also help them think about how our general relations and ways of being with others depend on sight.

(If someone in your class does use adaptive technologies, and is willing to demonstrate them, this can be very striking for others: it is always surprising to realize how much we act as though the designs of our worlds can only be as they are, and how difficult it can be for people who have different kinds of bodies or senses to work within those designs.)

REDESIGNING TEXTS

This exercise can build off the previous exercise.

Ask students if they have ever tried to read the same essay or a book together with someone else, holding the book or journal together. How comfortable was the situation? What did they have to do differently than when they read alone (wait for the other person to finish reading a page before going to the next? push two chairs uncomfortably close together?)?

Ask students to take a paper they'd written earlier, of 3-5 pages (or longer), and (for homework) to reformat it so that it encouraged more than one person at a time to read.

In class, have them show their reformatted texts to each other. What redesign strategies most appeal to them, and why? How do the changes shape how they read and respond to the texts? Are there any formatting strategies that they can see using in other circumstances?

(You can also ask them to reformat texts to make them easier to read aloud. It's useful then to talk to people who present papers regularly at conferences, to see the range of strategies some people use [using larger typefaces, breaking the text up sentence by sentence, bolding the parts they want to be sure to emphasize as they speak, printing "remember to breathe!" in between sections so they will be less nervous, and so on].)