

When Pedagogy Does the Driving: New Ways of Approaching Technology in the College Classroom

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Jeff Rice (2004). *Writing About Cool: Hypertext and Cultural Studies in the Computer Classroom*. New York: Longman. 176 pp. Bibliographic references and index. \$30.60 (paperback, 0-321-10896-5).

Gregory L. Ulmer (2003). *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*. New York: Longman. 352 pp. Bibliographic references and index. \$40.80 (paperback, 0-321-12692-0).

Jeff Rice's *Writing About Cool: Hypertext and Cultural Studies in the Computer Classroom* and Gregory L. Ulmer's *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy* are two more provocative contributions to the ongoing discourse revolving around technology in the college classroom. The art of teaching compels us to continually express our pedagogy in creative, alternative approaches to writing that go beyond what is typically expected in the computer-mediated classroom. "Technology, technology, technology!" is the hegemonic rallying cry on today's campuses, but the questions that educators and students alike should ask are whom does technology serve and who or what is driving this call to action? Is our pedagogy driving the technology, or is technology driving our pedagogy? Fortunately, both Rice and Ulmer know which should drive which.

Through a clever deconstruction of the concept of cool, Rice explains how the word originated within Yoruban culture, was brought to the U.S. by slaves, and, ultimately, became co-opted by mainstream culture through the advertising and marketing industries. Rice also presents an accessible overview of terms that may be unfamiliar to undergraduate students. In addition to "hypertext" and "cultural studies," he explains the concept of "culture" itself, as well

as “dominant discourse.” The definitions and examples are presented in easy-to-understand terms that help lay the foundation for Rice’s larger point: a twist on word usage — *cool* not merely as a noun but as a verb, a way to write. By co-opting cool back from mainstream culture, students may use this revised version of cool as it applies to online writing. As Rice notes in his introduction, “This book attempts to explain the relationship between cool and technology by emphasizing the activity that bonds these two areas: writing. In order to do so, this book teaches cool as not just a subject to study, but as a new form of electronic writing as well.”

In a sense, students reading Rice’s textbook are getting a mini-lesson in deconstructionist theory and may not even realize it. Rice speaks the language of youth subculture, posing questions, for example, that link dominant ideology to popular television shows such as MTV’s *The Real World*. He asks whether the program poses an affront to traditional family values or, instead, perpetuates these values. Moreover, he suggests that readers re-examine the expression “family values” itself. By presenting critical-thinking questions to students, Rice encourages a dialogue that urges them to re-think, among other issues, their rhetorical assumptions about the exercise of power and the media’s role within that exercise.

One problem with Rice’s book is that during some of his discussions, students are getting bits and pieces of information without getting the tools needed to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. In essence, Rice’s book is, at times, informative without being critical of issues that need to have a critical eye turned toward them. To illustrate, during his discussion of “African-American Cool” in Chapter 6, he explains — in detail — the significance of Amiri Baraka’s contributions to the definition of cool (“a rhetorical response to oppression”) and how students can use this definition in their own writing. Surprisingly, Rice omits the fact that Baraka has

repeatedly used racist language throughout the last four decades of his fight against oppression. In a widely publicized incident in 2003, Baraka was dismissed as New Jersey's poet laureate after critics protested his long history of [anti-Semitic rhetoric](#). Oppressing one group to liberate another group is acceptable? Again, Rice presents the pieces without showing students the wholeness of the puzzle. This disturbing aspect detracts from what is otherwise an interesting project as students move from print to electronic writing.

While Rice deconstructs the concept of cool, Ulmer deconstructs the concept of self in relation to online writing. Quoting Japanese poet Basho, who wrote, "Not to follow in the footsteps of the masters, but to seek what they sought," Ulmer de-centers the educator's role in the classroom by showing students how to compose what he calls a *mystory*. As Ulmer explains on page 79, "Mystory does for postmodern persons what allegory did for medieval persons: allows them to locate their position in the popcycle of their epoch."

Ulmer divides *Internet Invention* into five distinctive parts, each one detailing the steps students take in creating their individual mystories. For this process, students evaluate their relationships to four institutions (career field or major, family, entertainment, and community history) before interlinking these four together. One assignment detailed under "family discourse," for example, involves students creating websites "documenting a scene that sticks in your memory from the childhood years of your family life." According to Ulmer, the final interlinking stage enables patterns of repeating signifiers to emerge. In the end, the mystory provides "a cognitive map of its maker's 'psycho geography.'"

Following today's trend of providing online textbook supplements, both Ulmer and Rice offer student and instructor resources on their companion websites for [Internet Invention](#) and

[Writing About Cool](#). It is somewhat unsettling, however, to enter Ulmer's site and be greeted with Camus' quote, "A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." In this supposedly post-feminist age, why are we still embracing sexist language? Also, it is interesting how Ulmer's pedagogy suggests that students move beyond assumptive discourse, yet his use of Camus tends to perpetuate dominant discourse on what constitutes art. How do we define "great and simple images"?

Despite the concerns cited above, Rice's and Ulmer's books expand the discussion on the importance of incorporating computer technology in college courses by offering alternative projects that encourage students to go beyond the mundane technical approaches of, say, how to create a website merely to increase their job prospects after graduation. Are educators expected to cultivate simply better workers or better critical thinkers? Rice and Ulmer exemplify how educators can effectively share with students the idea that in order to construct new ways of looking at ourselves and the world, first we need to deconstruct the old ways.