While You Were Out: Furnishing Digital Space for a new Decade

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These tools [databases] are actually texts—maps that suggest and validate ways of thinking and acting; they are not isolated artifacts.

Johnson-Eilola, *Nostalgic Angels* p.6

**Definition of Tool Use:** The employment of an unattached environmental object to alter more efficiently the form, position, or condition of another object, another organism, or the user itself.

Ndoundou-Hockemba Breur and Vicki Fishlock

**INTRODUCTION**

This definition, taken from a November 2005 article in the online journal, *PLos Biology*, does not refer to human computer users. It is an article discussing tool use in western gorillas. Readers might well ask what the relationship is between tool-using gorillas and the renovation of the Praxis section of *Kairos*, which is the subject of this introductory article. Our answer is that we feel that our efforts to “renovate” the Praxis section of *Kairos*, to make it an increasingly useful resource for teachers and scholars who are interested in human tool users—particularly those who make use of digital tools for various kinds of writing and composition activities—needs to remain actively aware of the dynamic relationships between tools (objects/artifacts), specific digital writing environments, and the individuals and groups who use them. In other words, the most important part of the above quotation is the verb: to alter. We feel that the alterations that occur as humans use digital tools to compose are, in themselves, an important object of study and discussion. The alterations we are proposing for the Praxis section of *Kairos* are designed to provide a location where these dynamic relationships between objects, tools, artifacts, people,
and locations can be captured. However, our primary goal is to create an environment where reader/users can consider and build different combinations of relationships for themselves and for their students.

As the members of the editorial staff (a team of 11 scholars from various universities) discussed the possibilities available for our renovation of the Praxis section, we agreed that Praxis’s usefulness is inextricably linked to its ability to feature webtexts, written by members of various fields, which focus on the practical uses of technology in various types of learning environments. In its most recent iteration, Praxis has specifically called for webtexts, somewhat shorter in length than feature webtexts, that focused on the practical use of various kinds of digital tools or environments. This is not to say that webtexts in this section are not theoretically grounded, but we have solicited and published webtexts that we hope are of immediate, practical use to teachers and administrators who work with and in digital environments. For example, two articles published in the Praxis section in the past two years focus on preparing instructors to teach in digital environments [e.g., Atkins (2006) “Writing/Teachers and Digital Technologies,” and Hewett & Powers (2005) “How do you Ground your Training?”]. Other recent articles have dealt with topics such as evaluating online sources (Ridolfo, 2006) and using audio/visual technologies in the classroom (Rezak, 2004).

We are eager to incorporate this practical value into the re-design of the Praxis section, but we are also interested in making use of advances in available technologies, as well as new perspectives on information storage and retrieval, as we create a space within Kairos that provides a more flexible, interactive location for teachers, scholars, administrators, and composers to find and share information about their varied and creative uses of different kinds of tools and different kinds of digital environments.

PLANNING THE PRAXIS RENOVATION

In developing our ideas for this renovation we were also aware of the growing interest in (and excitement about) the use of open-access databases as resources for researchers. Obviously, Wikipedia, is one of the most well-known of this type of database-driven community
information-building, but calls for similar kinds of resources have also been made for a variety of disciplinary interests within the field of Composition Studies. At the recent Computers & Writing conference in Lubbock, Texas (2006), I heard no less than eight different speakers and respondents make calls for various kinds of open-access resources, in which users would be able to create and edit such diverse kinds of information as rhetorical terms and figures, research methods for composition studies research, and histories of the evolution of the discipline of computers & writing.

We feel that the goals of Praxis (and its content) are uniquely suited to some adaptation of this kind of information resource. We want to be able to provide practical, usable information about how different individuals, departments, and schools (college, university, or K-12) make use technology. We want to include information about the use of both cutting-edge technologies and technologies whose use may be more appropriate to technologically-inexperienced teachers or users who do not have access to the most recent hardware and software products. To best achieve these goals, we have decided to create a wiki-based resource that will allow users to contribute short narratives about specific learning situations in which they have made use different types of digital tools and environments. These short webtexts (approximately 3-5 pages in length) will be accessible via an evolving list of keywords, as well as a general search engine. The Praxis editorial staff, which consists of two editors and nine assistant editors, will continuously work to edit webtexts, correspond with authors, and develop new key terms to help users better locate helpful narratives. Users will also be able to sign-up and log-in, both to contribute new narratives and to edit/annotate/extend existing narratives. We feel this combination of an edited publication venue with a modified open-access database will provide a rich and ever-evolving resource for readers of Kairos.

Additionally, in each new issue of the journal we will feature a particular tool/space (a type of software, hardware, or a new kind of digital environment) and include one or more “showcase” webtexts that deal with the use of the featured topic. These webtexts will be more fully developed pieces – greater in length, and including very specific details about uses of the tool/environment that should help readers develop their own teaching and composing activities. In
providing both these longer, descriptive pieces and a diverse collection of shorter narratives, we hope to make the Praxis section a helpful resource for readers who are looking for more explicit suggestions for using a particular tool or environment, as well as a resource for users who may simply be browsing for new ideas to add their existing activities.

While narratives of classroom activities come most easily to mind when contemplating the kinds of contributions that authors might make to the Praxis database, we don’t think that classroom narratives are the only potential use for the database. We feel the database can (and should) also include narratives about the tools that individuals use for composing their own projects, both within and outside of school settings. For example, a user might want to contribute a narrative about a particular experience using Macromedia (Adobe) Dreamweaver to compose an article that was published in *Kairos*, or another online journal, to describe the creation of a political or creative blog, or to describe the impact of Flash as a tool for composing a digital chapter of a thesis or dissertation. We are also interested in narratives that do more than simply narrate the details of use. For example, our editorial staff would certainly ask the hypothetical author of the narrative on Flash as a dissertation-writing tool to think about and discuss the implications of this tool use on the material, on her composing processes, on her understanding of her theoretical frameworks, and potentially on the experience of the audience for the finished composition.

As we work create this online environment for sharing and creating knowledge about our digital composing practices, we have developed the following descriptions, which we hope will help potential contributors understand the kinds of narratives that we envision as valuable information resources for our readers. However, we welcome discussion of this resource, as well as suggestions for creating our author guidelines and establishing editing practices.

CONTRIBUTING SHORT NARRATIVES

The *Short Narratives* for the Praxis section will be peer-reviewed webtexts that contributors can list on their curriculum vitae – perhaps equal to an encyclopedia entry in terms of publication credit. Authors will submit these webtexts to the review staff, who will provide editing assistance
and suggestions for revision. New contributors will not have the ability to post directly to the Praxis database, which we plan to title “Digital Tool Users.” Once contributors have had an article accepted and published, however, they will be issued a login and password that allows them to create new narratives, as well as to edit existing narratives, (both their own and those of other authors). Contributing authors will be asked to include the following elements in their narratives:

- **Description of the Tool:** Narratives should always include basic descriptions of the tool or environment, including any information necessary for others to find and use it. For example, for a narrative about the use of particular web-editing software, the contributor would include information about the publisher, as well as the version of the software. For a narrative about the use of a digital environment such as Wikipedia (e.g., a narrative about using Wikipedia as part of a classroom writing assignment), the contributor would include a URL for the site, as well as a description of the interface.

- **Description of the Activity:** Tool use narratives should also be as specific as possible regarding the activities surrounding the use of the tool or environment. Contributors will want to explain the composing process for which the tool was used. They will want to provide details about who engaged in these activities and the impact the use had on the final composition(s). Finally, they might want to consider comparisons of the use they are describing and other potential uses, or even other types of tools they might have (but didn’t) use to compose.

- **Contextual Considerations:** Narrative contributors should consider, and should provide readers with details regarding the contextual elements that have shaped the use of the tool or environment, or influenced the final composition. For example, in a narrative about the use of a particular software, it may be critical to include information about when and where users had access. In another example, in a narrative regarding the use of one or multiple blog spaces as
writing environments for students, the contributor would want to discuss whether face-to-face activities affected the authors’ use of or writing in these spaces.

- **Additional Resources**: Contributing authors should be sure to include information about resources they used when creating assignments, developing programs, or learning how to use software or hardware products. They should also attempt to note [where applicable] other hardware/software that might be used, particularly comparable recourses that can be accessed free of charge.

- **Multimedia**: Our plan for the database is to allow contributors to include addenda for their narratives in the shape of image, sound, or multimedia files. Obviously, bandwidth and accessibility is an issue for our readers, so these files will need to saved in usable, cross-platform formats, and contributors should pay close attention to file size.

- **Tagging & Keywords**: Contributors should include a list of keywords they feel might be useful for other users who are searching the database for information.

- **Submitting Narratives**: Contributors may query the editors at any time regarding submissions. They can send either completed narratives or brief summaries proposing narratives to the editors at kpraxis@technorhetoric.net.

CONTRIBUTING WEBTEXTS

The longer webtexts published in the Praxis section will be essentially extended versions of the short narratives. We feel these extended versions will be useful because they will allow readers to better visualize and understand the complex systems of interacting elements that shape digital compositions. These webtexts will be peer reviewed by the Praxis editorial staff [NOTE: At least one section editor and 2-3 assistant editors will review each contribution], and they would be equal to webtexts in other sections of the journal in terms of their publication credit for authors.
who are seeking tenure. Submissions for these webtexts will be subject to the following guidelines:

- **Topical Relevance**: In each issue of the journal we will establish the “topic” for the next several issues. Calls will be posted in various locations, inviting authors to submit their webtexts for publication. Because multiple authors will be submitting webtexts that address the same general topic, authors submitting queries should indicate the unique aspects of their experience with the tool or environment under discussion. Webtexts for this section will be similar in some ways to the shorter narratives, so the guidelines for short narratives listed previously will also apply to submissions for the longer webtexts. However, the additional length will allow authors to explore in more detail issues such as the application of a particular theoretical lens to work in digital spaces, the comparison of different tools or different composing environments, the evolution or development of a university-wide or department-wide change in technological tools, or the effects of a particular tool on the processes or products of a particular composition product or environment.

- **Article Templates**: One important aspect of the Praxis section of *Kairos* is our desire to promote the use of this section by teachers and scholars who are new to the use of digital tools or environments. As a result, we plan to offer a template for webtexts that can be used by authors who are less comfortable with the process of composing webtexts for a web-based environment. Potential authors who wish to make use of such templates can indicate need for design or coding assistance in queries to the editors.

- **Other Formatting Issues**: Authors submitting tool narrative webtexts will, for the most part, follow the submission guidelines for webtexts in the other sections of *Kairos*. Citation format should be APA, and authors can expect to work with the
Editors regarding other usability issues such as visual design and file size and format.

- **Submitting Queries:** Contributors may query the Praxis editors [Joyce Walker & Colleen Reilly] at any time regarding submissions. Before submitting webtexts, they should send a brief query that summarizes their project. Contributors may also send suggestions for topical categories for future issues to the editors at kpraxis@technorhetoric.net.

**THE REVIEW PROCESS**

- **Submitting Short Narratives:** Narratives that are submitted for review will be assigned to members of the Praxis editorial staff. Narratives that are accepted will undergo a collaborative process of editing. Editors may suggest that contributors revise narratives and submit them for further review.

- **Submitting Webtexts:** Authors who receive a positive response to a query regarding an article-length narrative will submit finished webtexts to the editors. These webtexts will then be assigned to members of the Praxis editorial staff for review. Webtexts may receive suggestions for revision or may be advanced to the 2nd tier of the editorial process, where authors will work closely with two members of the review staff to make the necessary changes for publication.

- **The Praxis Review Staff:** The Praxis review staff currently consists of the following 11 members:
  - Joyce Walker, Western Michigan University (Section Editor)
  - Colleen Reilly, University of North Carolina - Wilmington (Section Editor)
  - Daisy Pignetti, University of South Florida (Assistant Editor)
  - Jeremy Tirrell, Purdue University (Assistant Editor)
  - Lynne M. Lepley, East Carolina University (Assistant Editor)
BECOMING A PRAXIS CONTRIBUTOR

Once authors have contributed either a short narrative or longer article that has been accepted and published in the Praxis section, they will be invited to participate as editor/contributors for the database. While they will not be assigned specific editorial duties, they will be encouraged to use their skills to amend existing webtexts or to contribute new ones.

CONTACTING THE EDITORS

The Praxis editorial staff can be contacted at kpraxis@technorhetoric.net. All queries should be sent to this email address.

UPCOMING PRAXIS TOPICS
BIBLIOGRAPHY


