Book review

Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet
by Todd W. Taylor and Irene Ward (Editors).
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In their introduction the editors claim that this is a book for writing instructors written by writing instructors. Although they do not mention this explicitly it is clear that they are assuming a USA context. Not only are all the contributors from universities in the United States but many chapters also refer to the contemporary situation of what they call 'composition and rhetoric studies' in a way that is very specific to the USA. The editors continue, as editors of academic collections often do, to make a virtue of the diversity of styles and variety of methods found in the different chapters. They describe this as 'polyvocal' and write that they prefer, 'useful noise' to 'synthetic harmony'. However they do claim that there is some order to be found in this diversity. The book has three thematic sections, the first is vaguely defined but seems to deal with global theory and economic issues; the second section looks broadly at 'the relationship between material reality and rhetoric' and the third looks at pedagogy. The aim of the collection is therefore presumably to contribute both to the theory of literacy on the internet and to the practice of writing instruction using the internet.

The three part schema offered by the editors sounded a sensible way to approach this large area. I found the first chapter excellent in reminding us of the social and economic context of literacy and the internet which is too easily forgotten. The author linked the internet persuasively to what he called 'the revolution of the rich' in the USA. However the chapter was introductory and programmatic leaving a need for more detailed exploration of these issues. I was disappointed to find that the other chapters in this section did not provide this and had no linking theme that I could discern.

The second section 'literacy and the electronic body' had more coherence with three articles looking at the relationship between identity based on the physical body and identity on the internet. I found one of these chapters by Beth Kolko really useful as a sensible discussion of the issues backed by a survey of the literature. Her conclusion,
supported by evidence, is that bodily self-identity persists despite some interesting changes in the direction of greater fluidity.

Be warned that many of the authors appear to have been infected by what Richard Dawkins and other exponents of `memetics' or `meme theory' would doubtless call the virus of postmodernism. I found the foreword particularly off-putting: it exemplified a problem with the book as a whole. This short piece was called: Foreword/Forward (Into Electracy). The effects of the virus are easy to spot here: words cut or combined strangely, unexpected parentheses and neologisms introduced without excuse or explanation. This virus also seems to affect thought processes, leading to delight in inconsistency and exaggeration. In a celebration of the convergence of the internet with postmodern theory we learn that `facts are always relative to theories' and then a little later on that: `Grammatology shows that the formation of identity in terms of "selfhood" is specific to the experience of literacy'. A short chat with almost any non-literate person or a stay in any non-literate society would have shown the author that this is nonsense. It is insulting to claim, as he does, that non-liters experience self as `a visitation from a god', as if they are all schizophrenics. I think that I understand why he wants to believe this theory. His real concern is not with what he sees as a pre-literate past but with what he hopes will be a marvellous post-literate future brought about by the internet. This is a desire or faith that is typical of several authors in this collection, coupled with the same cavalier attitude to evidence or sense. (My dislike of the symptoms of postmodernism seen here is not aimed at the poststructuralist theory often taken to underlie it. Derrida for example, the philosopher who coined the term `grammatology', uses language and argument very differently from the simplistic postmodern posturing that blights some of these chapters.)

One chapter cunningly entitled

left me rather confused. I think that this looked at models for understanding identity formation on the internet and advocated one that the author calls `transgenic'. We learn, by way of definition, that:

`The transgenic (non)model represents a distributed field of figures of hybridization and genetic engineering and thrives in the matrix of rhetorical and textual writing technologies.'

The author does not, of course, explain what the difference is between an old-fashioned `model' and her new-fangled `(non)model'. I wonder if the author would see my desire to be enlightened as a symptom of unreconstructed modernism?

Another chapter exhorts teachers to value the creation of links as much as the creation of content. The problem, the author writes, is how teachers still promote the authorship of unified and bounded `single-voiced' texts. As an alternative he appears to celebrate a more fragmented, disjointed and linked style. I would like to be persuaded that he had a reason for his view other than his faith in what he takes to be a postmodernist position. In an interesting image that suggests a breathtaking technological reductionism the author associates postmodernism with following the links in hypertext and enlightenment philosophy with a focus on its nodes.

I worried to see that one chapter was a loosely written analysis of a single `cyperpunk' novel, *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. In fact this turned out to be one of the more enjoyable and insightful contributions. The author argues from this text that `cyberpunk' literature contains a new form of `piety' and seeks a return to an `edenic' state through the internet.
I found this theory useful in understanding another contribution called: 'Writing in the Hivemind'. This is a poetic account of how seven writers met regularly online over a period of months simply to write together with no agenda. The authors point out that the writing they produced was ultimately unreadable and 'without value'. This was the whole point. It was not about writing — it was about altered consciousness. I found this account fascinating but could not help wondering at their faith in theory. They feel that they achieved some kind of group mind but do not critically examine the source of this experience. Are we exploring the effects of a technology here or the effects of faith?

Further illustrating this strange faith in theory another chapter is devoted to a confession by a writing teacher that he thinks he has re-produced Foucault's famous panopticon — a sort of architecture for supporting centralised control — by the way in which he arranges work on computers in this composition classroom. The author justifies controlling his students in this way because it is in their best interests but he nonetheless seems to feel very guilty about it. Reading this made me want to remind him forcefully that he did not need to believe in Foucault. I wondered what perverse academic apparatus of thought control constrained him to deny his own values. There is certainly a lot of noise being generated at the interface between literacy theory and the internet. This volume offers us samples of that noise, mostly from the avant garde end of the spectrum. Is it 'useful noise' as the editors claim? I found it too much of a mixed bag. It would have benefited from a more rigorous editorial policy from the outset. I cannot recommend buying it on the strength of the two or three articles in it that are really useful even though some of the others are quite entertaining as snapshots of what internet writing instructors are getting up to in the USA today. Page to Screen: taking literacy into the electronic era edited by Ilana Snyder (Routledge, 1998) deals with much the same topic in a much more international way.