

## D21: Peer-Review in Digital Scholarship

For about a year, I've been using one student-produced video that was popular with audiences to demonstrate theories of teaching with new media. I say "popular" because audience members would always ask for copies after the presentation. When my focus turned from teaching new media to researching digital scholarship, I used the same video as an example because the student's text had since been accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. When presented as scholarship, however, the audience reaction to this video was less enthusiastic to say the least. In this presentation, I address the issue of readers' reactions to this video as a case study for understanding the assumptions that readers make when evaluating digital scholarship.

The video was composed by Robert Watkins, a Masters student in creative writing who was enrolled in my multimodal composition pedagogy class at Utah State University in 2006. The video is called "words are the ultimate abstraction: towards using Scott McCloud to teach visual rhetoric," and it is forthcoming in the *Kairos* special issue on manifestos. I wish I could show you the entire 10-minute video, because it's pretty entertaining. For time sake, I'll show you the first two minutes, which sets up Watkins' argument about teaching visual rhetoric.

SHOW VIDEO INTRO [2 min]

This additional 20-second clip, which plays in the ninth minute of the video, often plays a crucial moment in how audiences react.

SHOW FUNNY CLIP [20 s]

When used as a successful example of teaching new media, readers always laugh at this clip. So let me discuss what happens when readers don't laugh at this clip—a situation I'm using as a synecdoche for overall reactions to this scholarly video that is indicative of the statistics in the MLA's Report on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion, which says that nearly 50% of T&P readers have no experience evaluating digital scholarship. Making a rough comparison, there are 50% of readers who laugh at Watkins' video when it's presented as scholarship, and 50% who don't. It was in my most recent presentation of this video as scholarship where the reasons for this difference in reactions became clear.

So that we could engage in a discussion about the audience's assumptions of scholarly worth, I asked them to tell me what they thought was \*not\* scholarly about the piece. The answers varied wildly, literally from "Nothing" to everything. Based on their reactions, the audience fell into two camps:

Readers who could evaluate the video's creative elements (i.e., the punk-rock intro and a humorous, informal tone) alongside its traditionally recognizable scholarly elements (i.e., citation, linear argument), and

Readers who could not, in their words, "gain access" to the text because of its creative, seemingly nonscholarly elements.

One remark was representative of this latter group of readers: Commenting that while she could recognize the work that went into a peer-reviewed article or book, this reader did not know how

much work went into a video such as Watkins' and, therefore, couldn't accurately judge its intellectual rigor.

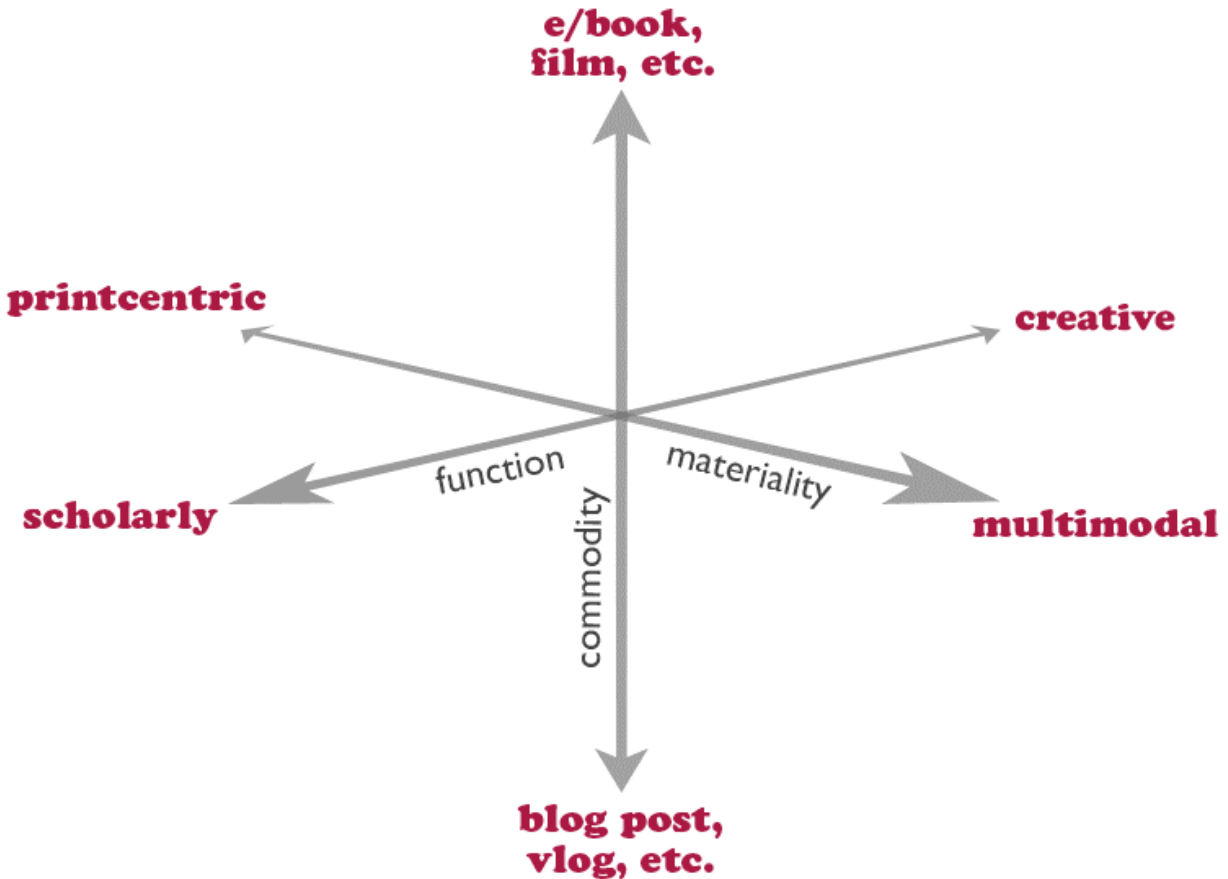
That comment exemplifies a major problem in the evaluation process for digital scholarship: In this case, value is determined by a reader's ability to recognize the labor involved in the process of creating an intellectual commodity. For humanities scholars, the process of writing an article has become internalized and is, therefore, well understood and valued. For a scholarly video, the value is lessened, not because of the product itself, but because readers don't recognize the rigorous composition process that it requires. I'm not sure how many hours of planning, researching, scripting, filming, editing, and revising that went into Robert's 10-minute video, but for a 3-minute video I recently made public, the process took nearly 18 hours.

Time, however, isn't the only issue. Neither is recognizing process, although understanding both of those issues might help in the long run. The real problem is that Watkin's video was accepted by a scholarly journal after having undergone peer-review, yet readers weren't able to value that peer-review is "enough," as it were, to make the video count. It counted well enough as a pedagogical example, but the moment it became a scholarly example, its value became suspect. So, the problem of legitimacy in digital scholarship is still prevalent, in some ways. For authors invested in digital scholarship, how can they get T&P readers to recognize their work as legitimate?

I believe we need to create more ways that T&P readers can learn to recognize their assumptions about scholarly processes so that they can re-evaluate their assumptions of and come to value peer-reviewed, digital scholarship. For instance, what if authors and readers were able to start a discussion like the one I witnessed where each stakeholder could assess their individual assumptions about a digital scholarly text. I would like to present one possibility of what this assessment might look like.

SHOW AXES & EXPLAIN (function, materiality, commodity)

*(Note: in the presentation, I used the wrong graphic, which had "style" instead of "function" – oops.)*



Although many variations of the axis terms are possible, these particular axes would serve as a starting point for tenure reviewers to recognize the different qualities at work and play in digital scholarship.

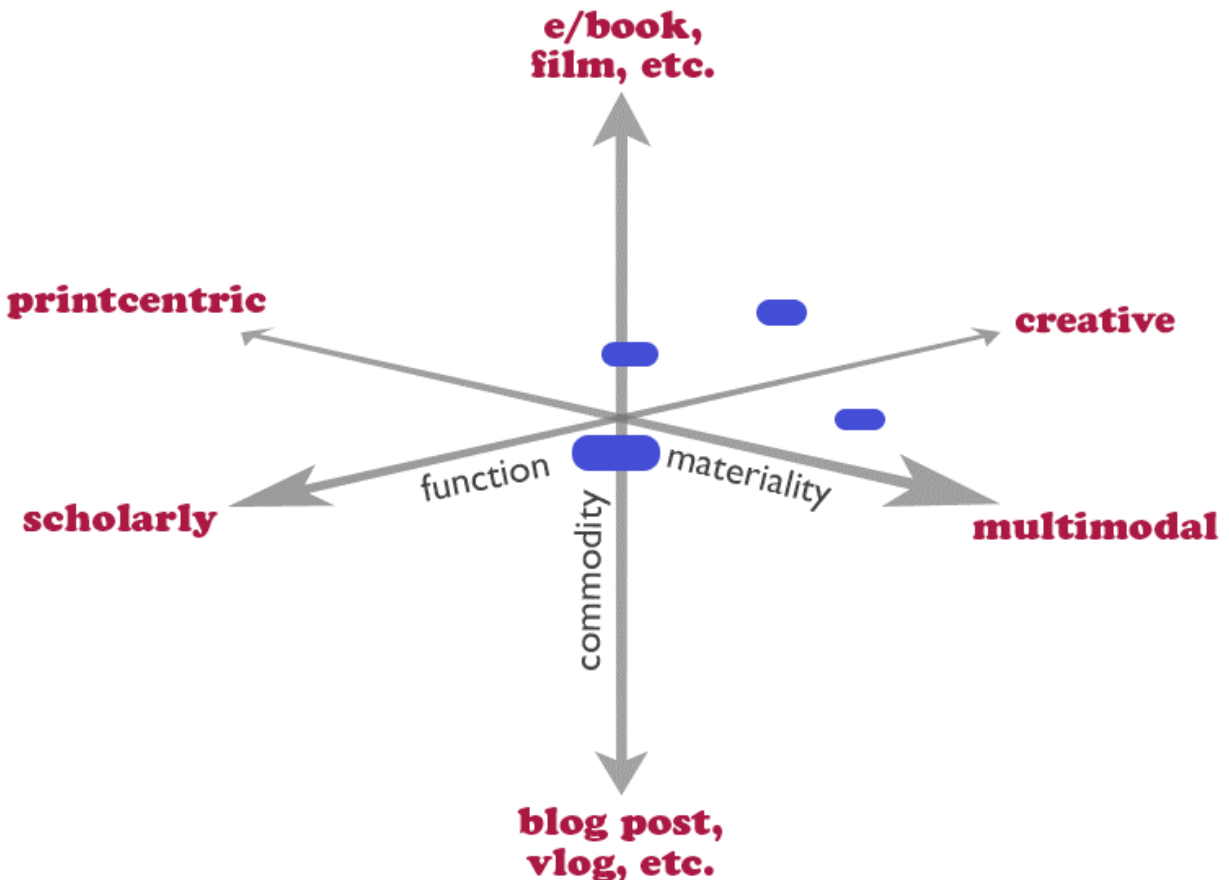
As an author familiar with composing similar texts, I would plot Watkins' video manifesto as midway on the commodity scale, highly multimodal, and slightly more creative than scholarly. A tenure reader might plot it differently, but then we could discuss those variances in relation to the text's value. Or, an author could use a tenure reader's plot point to craft a scholarship statement that attends to the reader's assumptions while also educating her.

Perhaps the most obvious use of such a semantic graph is to foreground the validity of online peer-reviewers and to use their expertise as a bridge between the author's evaluation of digital scholarship and the tenure reader's evaluation of it. For instance, two *Kairos* board members (who gave me permission to summarize or quote their reviews of Watkins' text for this talk) indicated that Watkins' use of multimodal elements to enact his argument made "perfect sense." One remarked that the clip I showed earlier, with Watkins' holding the McCloud book and then replacing it with Handa's collection on visual rhetoric, was "a riot." It's important to note, I think, that the reviewer was entertained by the portions of the video where he or she was supposed to be entertained. Briefly said, the text met its purpose. One reviewer even encouraged Watkins to make his text "more manifesto-ish" because it seemed "a bit academic in terms of

framing and tone.” This last statement shows me that *Kairos*’ peer reviewers plot digital scholarship along similar axes—certainly of function as it relates to style and genre in this case.

When shown a similar text to Watkins’, volunteers from *Kairos*’ editorial board plotted the text as such:

SHOW PEER-REVIEWER’S PLOTS (scattered)



This sample is typical of the number of peer-reviewers who respond to each *Kairos* submission on the journal’s listserv. The variation among plot points is representative of the varied expertise and assumptions that any peer reviewer of any journal has. The collaborative review process allows for bridge-building between board members’ expertise. In the case of Watkins’ video, some reviewers may value his logic and informal tone in relation to the manifesto genre while others may value his detailed attention to the way his argument is enacted across multiple media.

We cannot know what digital scholarship will look like in 2, 5 or 10 years, but we know it’s not going away. For those invested in this unstable yet invaluable form of scholarly communication, we need to be creative in the ways we approach readers, most especially tenure reviewers, in promoting the value of our work. Organizations such as The Modern Language Association, The Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Council of Editors of Learned

Journals can help by continuing to promote electronic publishing in their guidelines and resolutions. But other stakeholders—authors and online journal editors alike—must also work to promote digital scholarship in ways that make sense within our individual and institutional contexts. Foregrounding the peer-review process of online journals, of co-publishing scholarly statements that make use of peer-review comments that help readers evaluate our work, and of initiating conversations through semantic models such as the one I have presented will help tenure stakeholders recognize the legitimacy of digital scholarship in the humanities.