

Computer Writing and Research Lab

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Currents in Electronic Literacy: A New Vision

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Abstract: In this paper, we propose a new, review-based model for the CWRL's e-journal, *Currents in Electronic Literacy*.

The Problem

In their whitepaper "The Current State of *Currents*," Lisa Avery and Audra Rouse outline several ongoing problems with the CWRL's e-journal and propose some measures to allay these problems. Drawing on their observations as editorial board members and consulting with previous coordinating editors, Avery and Rouse propose ways of finding an audience and restructuring the staff. They recommend that the *Currents* staff seek out ways to publicize the journal. They suggest that the staff seek inclusion in relevant databases and links pages (and thanks to their efforts *Currents* is now indexed in the MLA bibliography) and create an outside review board of scholars with expertise in the field to make more informed editorial decisions. Because of these changes, Avery and Rouse explained the ways in which *Currents* could gain greater stature and attract more submissions.

However, this proposal only indirectly addresses our biggest problems: ongoing staff turnover, a diversity of research interests among staffers (very few of which do research in the field of computers and writing), and the most debilitating of all problems – the lack of quality submissions. Furthermore, the practical

matter of creating the board as Avery and Rouse suggest would be outside the network of typical staffers, thereby drawing heavily on faculty support. The end result of this structure would mostly likely be a separation between the intellectually interesting aspect of working on the e-journal and the more mundane tasks of administration, layout, and formatting. Staffers would then lose an opportunity to become conversant in the issues of electronic literacy, and their participation would be limited to that of technicians. Budget constraints and lab organization prevent the CWRL from meeting the time commitments of *Currents*. Faced with both internal shortcomings and an external dearth of contributions, the journal would seem to be in an untenable position. However, we believe that a change in format – rather than wide-sweeping structural changes – will allow us to operate effectively under present conditions. We believe that by changing *Currents* to a publication centered on reviews we can fill a present need (in both the CWRL and the field of computers and writing) with our existing resources.

Proposal

During the past two years, the CWRL's e-journal has received a number of quality book reviews, and these submissions have caused us to reconsider the model of *Currents*. Following a recent joint call for papers and call for reviews, we received roughly twice as many review submissions as articles. Moreover, the reviews were stronger than the articles, many of which are either seminar papers (at least once with the conventional heading intact) or rather obvious arguments from faculty just coming to terms with basic instructional technology. A history of such submissions leads us to conclude that there is an emerging class of scholars who are presently investigating electronic literacy but have not established large-scale projects. We believe a journal based on reviews can be of much greater use to these scholars than our current model, which consists of a few long articles supplemented by short book reviews. However, in this new model we will conceive of "reviews" more broadly. In addition to reviewing books, we would like to solicit reviews of software, websites, blogs, conferences, parallel academic programs, and pedagogical practices.

In addition to providing an annual collection of reviews, we hope that the new version of *Currents* will point out emerging trends in the field of electronic literacy. As useful as a bushel of short reviews would be, we believe that an organized approach would be more helpful. We hope to provide a filtering and evaluative service for our readers. For instance, we would encourage review essays, summarizing the state of the field. However, we could also arrange

discrete submissions into associated “strands” (or “currents”) to achieve a similar unity. To illustrate this point, let us refer to Clay Spinuzzi’s review essay of post-ANT scholarship in a recent issue of *Currents*. In this essay, Spinuzzi reviews three books from a single perspective and is therefore able to make general statements on the state of the field. However, *Currents* could also group individual

reviews of single books under the appropriate heading, and either offer some comment on the field (based on the reviews) or let the readers deduce this themselves. Such topical groupings could provide benchmarks to which subsequent issues of *Currents* could return. In the present example, Spinuzzi or another scholar could revisit the state of post-ANT scholarship some years later. Other topics might be revisited more frequently. For instance, a constant re-evaluation of web editing software would be of steady interest to readers.

In this model, the need for a staff with expertise in any particular field is largely relieved. Instead, those staffers working on the *Currents* editorial board need only have interest and general familiarity in issues of technology, writing, and pedagogy. We are confident that most intelligent readers can evaluate reviews regardless of expertise in the field. Additionally, we hope to build up a network of trusted reviewers who we might call upon as readers. We will rely on the expertise of our faculty adviser to identify areas of exploration, and we will issue calls for reviews as we have in the past.

Historically, we have supplemented external submissions with internal recruitment of articles and reviews. While this appearance of an in-house operation does damage our ethos as a journal, the fact is that the CWRL is in fact a leading producer of knowledge in the field. We hope that our network of reviewers will grow to include members of similar programs, and we plan to establish contacts in these institutions by reviewing such programs in an upcoming issue of *Currents*. Having an extensive network will allow us to tap into ongoing scholarship in computers and writing. For instance, at this very moment, any number of graduate seminars are reading and discussing texts on subjects such as new media and electronic literacy. By soliciting individual reviews from the students in these seminars, *Currents* would be able to usefully summarize and comment on a number of fields. Our own staff will of course remain a vital part of our network. Work group projects naturally incorporate the kind of research that could result in reviews, and the individual expertise can likewise be used. A Victorianist who staffs for us might not be interested in writing a review of wiki engines but would most likely be able and interested in writing a review of web resources for Victorianists.

While this topical orientation might seem to be conducive to more frequent publication or site updates, we recommend retaining

annual publication. This would allow us to produce issues that frame the “state of electronic literacy.” Further, preserving clear issues will preserve our ISSN and MLA indexing. Annual publication will also allow us to reallocate staff resources as needed.

We should use this opportunity to revisit our mission statement. Presently, it reads

Currents strives to provide a forum for the scholarly discussion of issues pertaining to electronic literacy, widely construed. In general, *Currents* publishes work addressing the use of electronic texts and technologies for reading, writing, teaching, and learning in fields including but not restricted to the following: literature (in English and in other languages), rhetoric and composition, languages (English, foreign, and ESL), communications, media studies, and education.

² <<http://currents.cwrl.utexas.edu/fall05/purpose.html>>

While this description still maps our general territory, we recommend taking the opportunity to update it. Since the new model exploits multiple connotations of the word “currents” by organizing streams of current conversation about different electronic media, we would like to take this opportunity to reframe the journal’s statement of purpose. We propose the following:

Currents strives to promote and organize the discourse of electronic literacy by reviewing and assessing the present state of the field. We define electronic literacy widely: literature (in English and in other languages), rhetoric and composition, languages (English, foreign, and ESL), communications, media studies, and education. *Currents* publishes reviews, review articles, and other scholarly work.

Staffing

We propose the following structure: two dedicated staffers (editors) to coordinate with the faculty adviser, who may approve the final publication during the fall semester. During the spring semester, the editors will target specific areas of interest, specify possible entities for review (books, software, and scholarly programs), and issue calls to appropriate forums. The editors will be responsible for reading all submissions, seeking out expert advice when necessary, proofing, formatting, and publication (which will be approved by the faculty adviser). We recommend that we publish *Currents* in a content management system such as Drupal, currently in use for many other lab projects. Publishing in a content management system will not only allow us to create a standard, professional appearance, but the use of categories and taxonomies will allow us to sort content into the

various “currents” mentioned above.

This new vision for *Currents* is one we believe suits the resources of the lab and the needs of the computers and writing community. By streamlining its e-journal, the CWRL can deal more elegantly with staff turnover and provide the scholarly community with a valuable resource. As we note in our revised mission statement, we hope that this new vision of *Currents* will help to “promote and organize” the ongoing conversation in the fields of electronic literacy and computers and writing.