

EXERCISE: COMPARING TEMPLATE PRESCRIPTS FOR AGENCY

PURPOSE

This exercise will help students to critically analyze possible templates in an effort to develop awareness of agency. They will learn to apply the concepts of prescripts (genre, interface, and design), agency, affordances, constraints, and metaphors. This will work best when scaffolding a larger multimodal assignment, probably in the early stages of invention/drafting.

DESCRIPTION

The class works in groups, each group testing and evaluating a template in an assigned platform. The templates arrive on a range of platforms: Wordpress, Blogger, Tumblr, Google Sites, Weebly, and Wix. Groups are asked to author a page containing prescribed content in a prescribed time period, and then asked to reflect on the process, using the language of prescripts and agency. The entire class discusses the findings of the groups, and compares the affordances and constraints of each template. Finally, each individual student reflects on the assignment in a journal entry.

TIME NEEDED

1-1.5 hrs; may be split across two class meetings.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Computer-based classroom, or access to 4-5 computers. Internet access. A clock or stopwatch.

PROCEDURE

Note: This exercise should be attempted only after the instructor has introduced the concepts of prescripts, agency, affordances, and constraints.

1. Divide the class into six groups. Each group should have access to a computer with Internet access.
2. Assign each group a platform: one group should have Wordpress, one group Blogger, one group Tumblr, and so on.
3. Instruct one person in each group to create a free account on their assigned site.
4. Ask each group to choose a template on the platform, and load it.

5. Instruct the groups to turn towards you, and write the words *design prescript*, *interface prescript*, *genre prescript*, *affordances*, *constraints*, and *agency* on the whiteboard. Ask students to recall the meanings of these terms, and write them on the board.
6. Tell students that they are going to have 30 minutes to create a post within the template (it probably will not take them this long). The post will contain: a 250-word blog post, a YouTube clip, two images, and a link to an outside article. The post will be on a subject of their choice. Write these things on the whiteboard for their reference.
7. Start the stopwatch, or notice the beginning time on the clock. Circulate throughout the room as the students work, answering questions as needed. Prompt students to take turns working with the template within their group.
8. At 30 minutes, have students stop working, whether they are finished or not. Prompt them to discuss their experience using these questions, and having one group member take notes:
 - a. What were the main affordances of the template?
 - b. What were the main constraints?
 - c. Which of the affordances and constraints were genre prescripts?
 - d. Which of the affordances and constraints were interface prescripts?
 - e. Which of the affordances and constraints were design prescripts?
 - f. Did you disagree within your group about whether anything was an affordance or a constraint?
 - g. Describe your feeling of agency within the template. Would it be different if you were working individually?
9. After students have had time to discuss, come back together as an entire class, and have each group present findings. What affordances and constraints do the templates have in common? Which ones have more or less genre, interface, and design prescripts? Which templates afforded a greater sense of agency? Which ones afforded less? Are these functions of the platform, or just the specific template?
10. Afterwards, or in the following class, have students reflect in a journaling assignment on these questions:
 - a. What did you learn about agency in this template exercise?
 - b. What did you learn about your own use of templates?
 - c. Which metaphor would you choose for your template: collaboration, mould, platform, or frame? Or something else? Why?
 - d. Does this give you any ideas about how or if you will use templates in your project?