



Anne Balsamo: "Our approach to pedagogy must shift from being teacher-centered to being learner-centered"

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<http://cinema.usc.edu/faculty/balsamo-anne.htm>

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Her research about gender, cultural theory and technological innovation has given her a wide perspective from which she analyzes the changing society we live nowadays. We met her in Maastricht (The Netherlands), in the European Journalism Center where she spoke about new media, new literacies and new pedagogies from a practical and also a theoretical point of view. We asked her to continue her interesting speech with an interview, and this is part of it.

@tic: In the conference you spoke about different and very interesting academic projects you are involved in the Institute for Multimedia Literacy. Would you mind to explain us about them?

Anne Balsamo: I served as the director of the University of Southern California's (USC) Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) from 2004-2007. During that time the IML faculty and staff were involved in several efforts to create cross-disciplinary undergraduate courses in multimedia scholarship. In 2005 the IML launched a 4-year undergraduate honors program in *Multimedia Authorship*. In 2006, the IML created a program called *Multimedia in the Core* which introduced multimedia authoring into *general education courses* at USC.

@tic: Is it easy for an Institute as the IML to get teachers involved in your academic projects?

Anne Balsamo: The *Multimedia Authorship Honors* program courses were taught by IML faculty and teaching assistants. The *Multimedia In the Core* courses involved general education faculty paired with an IML teaching assistant. The faculty taught the general education course in such a way that it incorporated multimedia assignments; the teaching assistants taught multimedia authoring labs that were connected to the main general education course. The first faculty who agreed to revise their typical general education course to include multimedia projects were those who had been trained at the IML in the previous five years. They were already mul-

timedia literate themselves. IML staff worked with individual faculty to revise their syllabi to include multimedia projects and assignments and to plan the corresponding labs.

@tic: Nowadays it seems that when you spoke about innovation —and also in innovation in a higher education institution or innovative education—, we imply necessarily the need of economical resources. Do you think that we establish a mistaken relationship?

Anne Balsamo: Innovations happen at different levels. There are simple changes that can be made that will improve the quality of education that don't require extensive economic investment. Here I'm talking about the incorporation of project-based learning, hands-on pedagogies, and peer-to-peer cooperative knowledge creation. These improvements are at the level of changes in pedagogy. The question becomes how will teachers learn to *teach differently*? Once we start talking about enabling teachers to gain new skills, we have to discuss the resources needed to provide this training. Teachers are extremely busy; in order to gain new skills they need time, training, and resources.

When we focus on other levels of innovation, such as the incorporation of networked computer resources into a classroom setting, or access to new educational programs, the issue of economic resources becomes more pressing. We know that we would like to enable students to access networked educational materials: who provides the computers for the students to do so? Do we assume that they will bring computers with them? Do all students have laptops now, or even access to machines in their homes? Or do we need to provide enough computers for students in their formal classroom spaces? Once we evaluate the current level of technology available to students, we encounter issues of economic resources.

@tic: When speaking about technologies, aren't we mythicizing them in excess? Are they the panacea?

Anne Balsamo: The technologies of the computer, of the network, of digital applications will not *in and of themselves* result in new educational experiences. They are an important resource for students and teachers to use. If used cre-



atively, the entire learning process can be expanded well beyond the boundaries of the formal classrooms. Through the use of networked digital applications and the *www*, learning can happen in many places *in addition* to the formal classroom. Learning can happen in the home, in the cultural center, in afterschool programs, in libraries, in museums. While this was always the case to some extent, it is amplified in the age of the *www*, when there are so many valid educational sites available now. But it still requires a *learning designer*, or *learning facilitator*, or *teacher* to guide students as they travel through various places on the *www*. They can learn by playing educational games, by engaging in interesting simulations, and by interacting with peers. But until they have acquired a self-directed sense and excitement for learning, someone must act in the capacity of a teacher to guide their travels, to model learning behavior, and to set the tone for enthusiastic digital enquiry.

From my perspective, it is not the technology by itself that will transform learning; it is the creative use and teaching with these new technologies that will effect more lasting change.

@tic: You have written about different kind of technologies and the fact that sometimes we use new technologies with old patterns and we eliminate the creativity that new ones can offer us. What possibilities offer us these new technologies? And, what reflections should we do about them?

Anne Balsamo: As I mentioned above, the new possibilities offered by the *www* and easy access to networked computers is the idea of a distributed learning environment. People can learn in many different kinds of physical spaces. Moreover, with the increasing popularity of social networking applications, we also know that people are learning *how to learn* from *one another*. The old idea that the only ones who could teach are those who are credentialed as experts has been put aside. Through the use of social networks, people who want to learn something can make connections with those who have something to teach. And it is increasingly evident that most everyone, regardless of age or credentials has something to teach. So we are expanding not only the range of who can be a student, but also who can be a teacher.

@tic: You have spoken about the *Multimedia Authorship* and *Multimedia in the Core* programs, what did they consist of? What kind of activities did you do? and, what were their goals?

Anne Balsamo: I helped develop two undergraduate programs at the Institute for Multimedia Literacy. These programs have continued under the guidance of the new director, Holly Willis:

1) *Undergraduate Honors Program in Multimedia Authorship* (<http://iml.usc.edu/index.php/programs/honors-program/>). In their first year of the program, students learn skills of image manipulation, video capturing, editing, and interactivity. During second and third years, students take courses in web design, web-based documentary, or video production. These courses are specially designed to promote the integration of multimedia into an academic setting.

In their final year, students complete a media-rich thesis project within their major course of study. The objective for the thesis is that it explores a new genre of

multimedia scholarship. Examples of past thesis projects include the creation of a game to explore differences among religious frameworks, a multimodal exploration of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and an examination of user-controlled news outlets.

2) *Undergraduate General Education Program called *Multimedia in the Core**. It is now called *Multimedia Across the Collage* (<http://iml.usc.edu/index.php/programs/multimedia-across-the-college/>). This program was developed to create opportunities for undergraduate students to gain basic skills in the creation of media-rich documents and experience in using new digital applications in scholarly research. Working with faculty across many disciplines, the IML staff integrated multimedia research and authorship projects into courses in these disciplines. In this way, students and faculty were encouraged to explore how new authoring applications (such as wikis, blogs, and video logs) could be used to create new forms of scholarly expression in different disciplinary contexts.

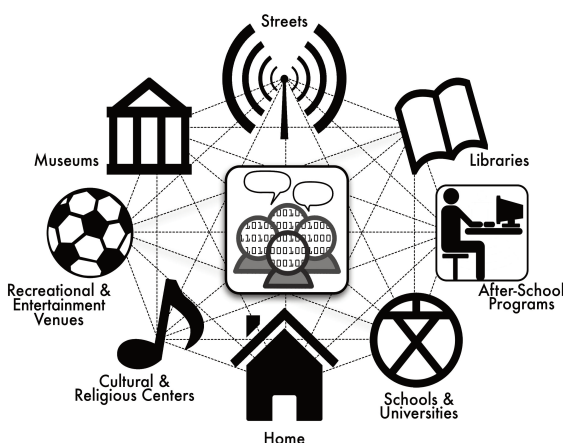
Here are a couple of examples of recent courses:

· *Foundations of Western Art*. In this course, the professor surveys European art in its historical, cultural, and social context. Students produce digital essays that compare works from the Renaissance to the contemporary landscape.

· *Chemistry and the Environment*. The professor in this course approaches society's issues about the environmental by introducing basic concepts in chemistry. Students are then taught how to make movies created with PowerPoint that advocate for policy change based on relevant research.

@tic: In the research you've done for the MacArthur Foundation and in the article "A Pedagogy for Original Synners" -with Steve Anderson-, you speak about this born digital generation, these *original synners*, why are they *original synners*? And how are these *original synners* as learners?

Anne Balsamo: The notion of *original synner* is a pun in English. The term *synners* is short for *synthesizers*. I call these students *synners* in recognition of the fact that they face the daunting task of *synthesizing* material from many different information flows and channels. The second connotation of the term *synners* suggests the notion of *transgression* (sinning). Here I am pointing out that these students will have to do more than simply summarize what they find in different media channels. They will have to learn how to read the information *against the grain* —to engage the information in critical ways. They will not only have to learn how to read different media flows, they will have to learn to read these critically! Then they have to learn how to creatively construct new insights. This is what will make them *original synners*. This should be the aim of our educational programs: to teach students how to harvest information from different and diverse media flows, to interpret the information critically, and then to create original knowledge claims using the information that they have harvested. In the process they learn valuable skills of: critical reading, rhetorical analysis, creative remixing of information flows, for the purposes of expressing new knowledge and new insights.



Where is School for the Born Digital Generation?

Balsamo, 2009

Figure 1: Illustration from Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

@tic: There you explore, and create a 2020 teaching situation, but where does learning take place nowadays and where will it take place in the next future?

Anne Balsamo: Learning takes places in many locations. This has always been the case, but not often as explicitly recognized as it is now. Here is a diagram that illustrates the notion of a *distributed learning network* that is made possible through the incorporation of information networks and mobile communication devices. Imagine the diagram (Figure 1) as an answer to the question: Where is School for the Born Digital Generation?

@tic: On the other hand, how do you think our pedagogical frames as a teacher have to change, as a consequence of the born digital generation new knowledge formation practices? And, how will our educational materials need to change to address this born digital generation?

Anne Balsamo: As the learning practices of our students change, and the locations of learning multiply through the use of networks and mobile devices, our pedagogical practices and our educational materials will also have to change. How these practices and materials need to change is the focus of some of our research at the University of Southern California Interactive Media Division. I have been investigating the role of museums and libraries as part of distributed learning networks: how does the use of digital media in these cultural institutions contribute to the overall *education* of the born digital generation? Some of my colleagues have been looking at the role of *educational games* by creating classroom materials in the form of games. Other colleagues have focused on the development of *project-based* learning exercises where students work in small teams to create multimodal research demonstrations.

In general, we believe that our approach to pedagogy must shift from being *teacher-centered* to being *learner-centered*. We are trying to shift from being solely focused on content, to the creation of learning activities that examine the role of *process* of knowledge making. We are shifting from a sense of *content-based* literacies to a notion of *procedural-based* literacies. In short, we are trying to shift our thinking about education from being about *learning that* to *learning how*.

@tic: An important part of your theoretical work is about the consequences of new technologies on power relationships in society. In fact, your next book if I am not mistaken, is about the relationships among technological innovation, the technological imagination, and cultural reproduction. How are these relationships? How do you think the information and communication technologies have affected society and the subject?

Anne Balsamo: My new book, *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work* examines the cultural work of design in framing the notion of innovation. I argue that *designing* is a crucially important practice of cultural reproduction. I think we need to teach students basic design processes, principles, and procedures. But these skills are not enough to ensure that they will design culture in a more positive way. We also need to train their imaginations—their *technological imaginations*—to think more creatively about the development of our (collective) technocultural futures. These students will be the ones developing new technologies, new cultural applications, and new cultural forms of experience and expression. I want them to do so with a robust imagination that can imagine both positive consequences and unintended ones; that can learn to see the consequences of innovations from the perspective of seven generations from now; that can understand that all technologies fail at some point and have to be discarded; that all technologies rearrange culture in important ways; and that designing technology is fundamentally an ethical practice of cultural reproduction.

To learn more about Anne Balsamo

Taking Culture Seriously: Educating and Inspiring the Technological Imagination. <http://www.academic-commons.org/commons/essay/balsamo-taking-culture-seriously>.

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"Working the paradigm shift: new pedagogies, new practices and new possibilities". In the "Youth Media and Next Generation Classroom" Congress. EJC. Maastricht, 15-16th October, 2009. [Video] <http://vimeo.com/7199135>.

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