

Interview with Ellen Rose

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Dr. Rose was interviewed by Laureano Ralón. March 24th, 2011.

Ellen Rose is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. Holder of the McCain-Aliant Telecom Chair from 2001-2010, she teaches graduate courses in Instructional Design. She also developed and coordinates the Masters of Education in Instructional Design and teaches other courses on critical approaches to new media as part of the university's Multimedia Studies B.A. Her areas of research interest are Educational computing/e-learning, Social and cultural implications of media and technology, Instructional design – new paradigms, Cultural studies and critical theory. Her books are *Hyper Texts: The Language and Culture of Educational Computing* and *User Error: Resisting Computer Culture*.

How did you decide to become a university professor? Was it a conscious choice?

At some point, such decisions must always be made on a conscious level, but in my case there was certainly a lot of preliminary positioning that took place below the level of consciousness. I worked for many years as an instructional designer in what is now called the e-learning industry, with no thought whatsoever of getting a doctorate or becoming an academic. But gradually I became aware of the disjunction between the hype surrounding educational technology and the reality of what we were doing, which was generally pretty banal and disappointing. Here we were, supposedly creating leading edge learning products, and yet the day-to-day reality of this work was that there was no opportunity for reflection, just continual, thoughtless reaction. I began reading Postman, Ellul, Mumford, and others in order to gain some insight into the mythology of technology underlying the hype.

And eventually academia became my only option – the only place in which I could step away and explore the kinds of questions I was now asking. But still, to be honest, I had no thoughts about becoming a professor. That came later, when I'd finished my doctoral program and began asking, with everyone else around me, "Now what?"

In your experience, how did the role of university professor evolve since you were an undergraduate student?

It's interesting that you ask this, because I was thinking about it the other day, in the context of an online course I've been teaching for a couple of years, for students in Trinidad and Tobago. (Of course, the fact that I'm teaching online is itself a sign of some profound changes in university education!) At the beginning of the course, I invite the students to address me by my first name, but they never do—the closest they can come is "Professor Ellen." It seems that, in their culture, there are certain barriers of hierarchy and respect for university education and teachers that make anything more familiar uncomfortable for them.

Those barriers were still largely in place here in Canada when I did my first degree in English literature in the early 1980s. With a few exceptions, most of my professors were inaccessible figures who stood in front of podiums and lectured to a largely passive audience. It's hard to get away with that today, as new media challenge the traditional hierarchies of knowledge, and I'm very thankful, because that's not a role I could ever see myself playing. On the other hand, I confess that when I get emails from students that begin, "Hey Ellen," I sometimes wonder if the pendulum has swung a bit too far in the opposite direction.

What makes a good teacher today? How do you manage to command attention in an age of interruption characterized by attention deficit and information overflow?

I never think of it as “commanding” attention; attention is something that I want my students to give freely. The best I can do is “encourage” it by engaging learners in conversations about interesting, relevant ideas. But I’ve been doing a lot of research on the phenomenon of “continuous partial attention” in the past year or two that has made me think quite differently about the question of attention. Continuous partial attention is a term recently coined by Linda Stone, a former Microsoft and Apple executive, to describe the continually fractured state of attention—or inattention—that came into being with the computer, internet, and what Sherry Turkle calls “always-on, always-on-you” devices, such as cell phones. Say you’re writing a paper, or reading a book—on- or offline; you’re constantly breaking away from your primary task, drawn by the irresistible urge to send or check for incoming messages, surf for information, and so forth. That’s the essence of continuous partial attention, and it certainly poses some interesting challenges for educators. Sure, students have been staring out classroom windows for years, but what seems to be happening now is that this state of perpetual distraction is becoming the new normal. I did some research recently in which I discovered, unexpectedly, that university students are actually in the process of redefining *attention* and *focus*. Students who admitted, in a survey, to often breaking away from online learning activities, sometimes for five minutes or more each time, described themselves as “very focused.” And distraction is also being reconceptualised—not as a hindrance to learning but a necessary diversion. Many students told me that they *needed* the distraction of incoming messages, etc., in order to sustain interest in their academic work.

So what can a teacher do with this new normal? There’s a lot of debate at my university right now about the possibility of banning laptops in class. I don’t see this as a viable option; there’s no point in trying to plug the dike when we’re already swimming in the ocean! In my opinion, it’s much more

important to involve students in the conversation, talk with them about these kinds of media effects—the ways new modes of communication structure information, thought, and language. I find that those are actually discussions they very much *want* to engage in. Beyond that, I don't pretend to have any answers.

What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring university professors?

I spent four wonderful years doing my doctoral work. This was after 15 years of working in the e-learning trenches, and the whole time I felt incredibly privileged to have the opportunity to spend my days reading, writing, and reflecting—exploring new ideas, pursuing fascinating tangents. Many of the doctoral students I speak to and work with today seem to be so goal driven, so unwilling to read a book or contemplate an idea that doesn't relate directly to their research question. I want to tell them, "Slow down! Make the most of this time. You'll never have another opportunity like this—even, or especially, if you get an academic position."

One of your forthcoming papers is entitled "The Phenomenology of Onscreen Reading: University Students' Lived Experience of Digitised Text." Would you give us a sneak peak?

I'm an avid reader, but I find it—not difficult, but different, reading on the screen. I'm much less inclined to linger over a text, more likely to scan it, search it for keywords. And yet there's the convenience trade-off (so much of our use of technology these days seems to be motivated by convenience, as though it's a miracle that we ever managed to exist without cellphones and laptops), as well as the fact that reading onscreen is more environmentally friendly. For whatever reason, there's no doubt that more and more of university students' reading for classes and research is taking place onscreen, in the form of e-books and PDF files

that were originally meant for the page, but then digitized. So I wondered what the experience of *onscreen* reading (as opposed to *online* reading of hypertext) was like for students.

I did discover some interesting things about the experience of onscreen reading. For example, it appears that in screen space, as opposed to what Ong called typographic space, the page either disappears as a unit of text (to be replaced by a fraction, such as 2/21, or the scroll bar), or it becomes a source of frustration that actually impairs reading, because pages rarely fit neatly onto screens. I also found, perhaps not surprisingly, that onscreen readers are very aware of the screen "glaring in my face," as one person put it. It's often a challenge to look beyond the reflective surface, where images of oneself, nearby objects, and the glare from windows and light sources, are superimposed upon the text. Most interesting to me, however, was the whole issue of focus—or the lack thereof; in fact, it was this research that led me to an exploration of the phenomenon of continuous partial attention. Ong observes that "Print...situates utterance and thought on a surface disengaged from everything else," but in screen space reading takes place on a surface cluttered with endless fascinating distractions that diffuse focus. Here's how one of the students I interviewed put it: "I'm wasting more time not reading than reading, you know, with e-mail and talking to other people. If it was a book I would read more than if it was online because there are more distractions, easier ways to, oh, I'm just going to check this, and totally forget that you're reading, and then an hour or two goes by and you're like, I guess I should go back." But it was also very interesting to me to learn that students are coming up with some creative strategies for finding focus. For example, they might enlarge the text they're reading, so that it becomes the center of both the screen and their attention, or they might read aloud, when alone. And several spoke about using music to drown out other sounds; it would appear that music is becoming the new silence.

Toward the end of his life, McLuhan declared: “Phenomenology [is] that which I have been presenting for many years in non-technical terms.” Do you think there is an affinity between media ecology and phenomenology?

I'd like to know the source of that quote—very interesting! In fact, this is a question I'm in the midst of sorting out, because I'm currently working on a research project with Catherine Adams at the University of Alberta that is based on the assumption that there is indeed an affinity between these two perspectives. Cathy and I first connected because of our shared interest in the way PowerPoint structures pedagogy; she was looking at it as a hermeneutic phenomenologist and I was looking at it as a media ecologist. Yet it was clear to us very early in our communications that there were some strong similarities and points of connection between our two perspectives on the topic of PowerPoint and pedagogy. So we've set out to formally examine those similarities and points of connection in a SSHRC-funded study of teachers' and students' lived experience of learning management systems, such as Blackboard. The research is now in its early stages, so I have nothing earth-shattering to share with you. But my new awareness of phenomenology has certainly caused me to read key media ecology texts in a different way. For example, McLuhan's work comes into a new focus when you look at it through the lens of phenomenology. Implicit in his biological metaphors of media as environments and extensions of the human body is a phenomenology of media—an awareness that communication technologies alter the nature of human consciousness and the texture of lived experience.

Ultimately, both media ecologist and phenomenologist are concerned with understanding the interplay and intertwining of media and human being-in-the-world. Both recognize that media and technologies touch us in ways that fundamentally alter our life-worlds. As Don Ihde says, both phenomenology and ecology study the interaction of the figure (organism) with its ground (environment). Ihde suggests that the key

difference may be where we position ourselves with respect to that investigation: phenomenologists try to get inside the organism, whereas media ecologists tend to be positioned outside or above it, in order to get a broader view of the kinds of interactions and interconnections taking place in the environment.

So how does PowerPoint structure pedagogy? What were some of the findings of that early study?

My interest was not only in how PowerPoint structures pedagogy but, more fundamentally, how it structures thought. Because before we use it to present, we spend hours creating the slides, so PowerPoint is increasingly also the means by which we marshal and organize our thoughts. I could go on at length about this (and often do, as my students could tell you), but let's just say that a lot gets lost, in the way of ideas and arguments, when we are compelled to conceptualize topics in terms of efficient bulleted points. And a lot gets added that really doesn't need to be there: elaborate backgrounds, clipart, screen transitions. These not only distract from but begin to take precedence over the verbal content—because increasingly, it is the technological virtuosity of the PowerPoint display, rather than one's contributions to a body of knowledge, that give the presenter the authority to speak. And, of course this is not just in the classroom: increasingly, PowerPoint also mediates academic dialogue. This was driven home for me six or seven years ago, when I attended a conference on educational technology. In one session, titters broke out among the audience members as a speaker put an acetate sheet on an overhead projector. In another session, a speaker apologized profusely for not having a PowerPoint presentation, and begged us not to leave, before beginning to read aloud from his paper. And in a third session, the topic of using instructional technologies in a humanizing way was presented with slide after slide of bulleted lists. When I pointed out afterwards the

contradiction between medium and message, the presenters were dumbfounded: they simply hadn't considered *not* using PowerPoint in this way. It worries me that, as slideware becomes de rigueur at conferences and in classrooms, people are using it in this unreflective way, without considering how it shapes their thinking or their messages.

Let's change the subject. In *Epistemology and the Design of Learning Environments* (2007), Hannafin and Hill argue that different epistemologies have corresponding psychological frameworks, each of which has in turn particular implications for instructional design. Two major epistemological perspectives are described in their book: *positivism* and *relativism*. Where would media ecology stand here? How do the insights of McLuhan et al inform instructional design practices?

Because I teach graduate level instructional design courses, I've given a lot of thought to the nature of the connections between instructional design and media ecology—or maybe I should say disconnections. Because, although they share a concern with media, communication, and education, there has not been much correspondence between the two fields historically. As you suggest, this disconnection goes back to fundamental differences in epistemology and philosophy. Instructional design arose in part as a reaction to the ad hoc, “common sense” approaches to instruction taken by most teachers; it's often referred to, in a boundary-forming way, as a “science of instruction.” Along with this positivist perspective goes a belief that the instructional design process is value free, and that the media used to deliver instruction are also entirely neutral. In fact, Richard Clark, an esteemed scholar in the field of instructional design/educational technology, is well-known for insisting that “media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition”—a

claim that McLuhan would call “the numb stance of the technological idiot.” However, the good news, from my perspective, is that these dichotomies are crumbling. The old timers continue to maintain a hard line; for example, I like to quote David Merrill on this: as one of the granddaddies of instructional design, he deplores what happens when “the structure of educational technology is built upon the sand of relativism rather than the rock of science.” But, increasingly, instructional design scholars and practitioners are actively finding ways to move beyond the constraints of science, so that their theories and practices are informed by multiple truths and perspectives. Given this trend, I hold out hope that media ecology *can* inform instructional design. And, of course, it already does in my courses, where I emphasize that neither instructional design processes nor the media of instruction, whatever they may be, are “just tools.”

What other projects are you currently working on and when is your next book/paper coming out?

Among other things, I’m wrapping up work on a book that has been in the works, often simmering on the back burner, for seven or eight years. I’ve spent far more time reflecting on it than writing it, which is appropriate since its title is *On Reflection*. Its purpose, briefly, is to assert the value of a form of thought that is very much in retreat these days, as our society places increasing value on the ability to react rather than to stop and think. Of course, as a media ecologist, I recognize that reflection itself was made possible by the emergence of new technologies—the alphabet and printing press—which enabled people to contemplate in solitude and silence. *On Reflection* traces the mediated emergence of reflection and then goes on to associate its current devaluation with the prevalence of new technologies that speed up the flow of information and the pace of life.

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Suggested citation:

Ralon, L. (2013). "A Conversation with Ellen Rose," Figure/Ground. March 24th.

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Questions? Contact Laureano Ralón at ralonlaureano@gmail.com