Course Design

English 3374: Writing, Rhetoric, and Multimedia Authoring

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English 3374: Writing, Rhetoric, and Multimodal Authoring, an introduction to multimodal composition rooted in the subfield of computers & writing, thrives in the literary studies focused English BA undergraduate program at The University of Texas at Arlington.[1] UT-Arlington is a Carnegie classified "very high research activity", HSI-designated, comprehensive university with a global enrollment of approximately 49,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

The English BA degree program offers undergraduate students some flexibility in degree progress. In addition to meeting state of Texas common core requirements, English BA students must enroll and complete three foundational courses (ENGL 2350: Introduction to Analysis and Interpretation, ENGL 2384: Structure of Modern English, and ENGL 3333: Dynamic Traditions in Literature) and meet credit requirements in "Early English Literature and Language" (3-credit hours), "Rhetoric and Theory" (6-credit hours), "Digital Writing and Authoring" (3-credit hours), and complete the 3-credit hour Senior Seminar. Students may also take four electives in any subfield course of English studies offered by faculty in the department.

An underlying assumption of the course reflects a long-standing position in Rhetoric and Composition—students do not compose in the alphabetic mode only and need exposure to and practice with the many modes of communication. Thus, the major goals of the course include development of the five multiliteracies (Arola, Sheppard, & Ball; New London Group; Selber)—with an introduction to an implicit sixth multiliteracy: tactility—through hybrid pedagogies of collaboration, feminism, and technological approaches.

The department describes the course in the undergraduate catalog as an "Introduction to the rhetorical structure of multimodality. An emphasis on composing writing-intensive and research-oriented projects for academic, business, and/or creative audiences. May be repeated for credit as topic changes. Prerequisite: ENGL 1301, ENGL 1302."

1. You can find the syllabi and course calendars for each Course Design essay on the *Composition Studies* website at https://compstudiesjournal.com/.

Institutional Context

The design of Writing, Rhetoric, and Multimodal Composition intersects with two local histories and personal experiences. The first history, located within computers and writing scholarship, continues the tradition of multimodal composition of teaching web design/development and in-class crafting and adds a new component: use of a university makerspace, a FabLab, developed in 2013 (with significant expansion in 2017).

Background and Observation of a University FabLab

Prior to my faculty arrival in 2015, a librarian—now director of the FabLab—sought funding for a small FabLab space through an internal university grant. The university granted seed money to purchase the required equipment needed for a space to be designated as a FabLab.

My path intersected when I joined UT-Arlington, prepared to teach this course with the composing practices common to what I conceived of as multimodal composition. Such projects included a digital literacy video biography and a made-from-scratch website using HTML and CSS, as well as activities with blogs, social media, and in-class crafting of objects that engaged with visual, spatial, linguistic modes though not necessarily through computing technology. When I toured the university during faculty orientation, the guide walked us through the FabLab located on the first-floor of the main library. Buzzing machines fabricating objects whirled. Bodies camped out. Hunched over computer screens, students sat, while the contents of backpacks littered the linoleum. On occasion, a FabLab worker offered assistance. Students engaged politely but firmly—just waiting. For these makers, crafting meant investing time. Near covetous of the technologies and the dedication to making, I visualized how to integrate the FabLab in Writing, Rhetoric, and Multimodal Authoring. I desired to inspire students to make things through rapid prototyping and iterative design.

The second history and experience occurred during the first offering of my course design and through the second and third iterations the course. A former faculty member, trained in computers & writing, proposed this and other courses (like ENGL 3372: Computers & Writing) during the 2000s, to expand undergraduate multimodal and electronic curricular offerings. Given this history, I assumed student exposure to multimodal composition in the curriculum when I joined faculty in 2015.

When students encountered the course, backlash to non-alphabetic essayistic writing ensued—fast. I learned, from enrolled students, that many courses in the English undergraduate program privileged "textual" work—with a strict definition of text as words on a page. This definition is quite different than how

computers & writing specialists define "text" as a body of work with linguistic, visual, and aural modes in multiple mediums (cf. Arola, Sheppard, & Ball, 2014). I also learned, from students, that faculty usually assigned projects with emphasis on alphabetic essays of literary analysis with little to no deviation except for some rhetorical analyses (conducted in essay form) and creative writing projects. Time has borne out some evidence to the contrary, and a couple of colleagues have shared student multimodal projects with faculty. However, student reports led me to conclude that the prevailing view of composition in the undergraduate curriculum assumed alphabetic essays.

Risky Reflection

Given this tension between the integration of the FabLab and English majors reporting experience with (and reliance on) essays, an alchemy transforming students' knowledge and practice from essayistic composition to multimodal composition occurred in spectacular fashion. I share here these two issues as points of professional vulnerability: 1) a feeling of being so out-of-bounds within an English studies program that I wondered—for some time—what I had to offer to the students and if my training fit with the overall culture of the department; and 2) a feeling of student uncertainty about moving outside of the intellectual comfort zone of essay writing—honed over years of practice—to use technology in the FabLab for projects that did not quite fit their conception of what English studies did or was. I discuss this strange mixture further in the critical reflection.

Theoretical Rationale

This course draws on the teacher/scholar history of multimodal theories and practices and uses hybrid pedagogies to train students for rhetorical production and distribution of the many modes and media available. Because students do not compose strictly essays in other courses or in their personal and professional lives, I see it as my job to prepare them for the multimodal and literate realities they inhabit; thus, the course design and scaffolded course learning outcomes, which I discuss in this section, reflect this position.

In contrast to the essayistic tradition of English studies, the NCTE 1996 statement, "On Viewing and Visually Representing as Forms of Literacy" posits educators need to introduce students to print and non-print texts. I use this statement to open discussion with students on the theoretical underpinnings of the course, which argue multimodality is not a new concept; rather, teacher/scholars in Rhetoric and Composition and English studies writ-large have advocated for writing with multiple modes of communication for decades. As Cynthia Selfe repeatedly argued, multimodality opens up all available means of communication and persuasion. As such, teachers must integrate these modes

in instruction unless they want to make English studies irrelevant for students who participate in a landscape saturated with multimodality across media.

Because of the complexity of multimodality and the need to convince students in ENGL 3374 of its relevance in English studies, the NCTE statement—in combination with two lectures, activities, and small- and large-group discussions about these many modes—forms a foundation for students. Additionally, this intellectual work prepares students to engage with one of the course learning outcomes, "Discuss how traditional forms of writing, i.e., the college essay, have changed in response to multimedia forms of authoring." I intend that students exit the course conversant in multimodality and are able to articulate, through personal advocacy and theoretical justification, the importance of the use of multimodal composition alongside (or in lieu of) the essayistic tradition in English studies.

Building upon this foundation, the course lectures, directed discussions, small-group work, and scaffolded activities include works by New London Group (1996) on multiliteracies in combination with *Writer/Designer*. I find that the authors of *Writer/Designer* expertly unpack the scholarly writing by New London Group to make terms accessible for an undergraduate audience. I use the multiliteracies article (1996) in two ways: first, to expand on definitions and terms given by *Writer/Designer*, and second, to show how Arola, Sheppard, and Ball explained complex scholarly work in a textbook for an undergraduate audience.

The two goals of these points intersect with another course learning outcome: "define key course terms (such as digital rhetoric/humanities, multimodality, multiliteracies, HTML/CSS) and be versed in the theories and practices of digital rhetoric & digital humanities." This outcome prepares students to speak conversationally to non-academic and academic audiences on these terms after course concludes.

The dual preparation of learning how to address varying primary and secondary audiences connects to another learning outcome of the course: "represent information ethically for diverse audience/stakeholders/clients." To meet this goal, students conduct audience analyses with each course project. By practicing audience analysis, students attend to the rhetorical situation, exigency, and 'difference zone' (Biesecker) when writing texts in varying contexts. Coverage of the Bitzer/Vatz debate—with Jenny Rice's (née Edbauer) and Biesecker's elaborations to draw attention to the complex and dynamic iterative process of audience and exigence (re)formation—informs lecture and discussion on the rhetorical situation. In bridging theory and practice, I provide students with an audience analysis heuristic to help orient them toward imagining audience. When course projects have real audiences, students use

heuristics to observe and record audience characteristics gleaned from visual and aural clues.

For every course project, students defined and used terms and developed audience analyses to meet another course learning outcome endemic to a multimodal composition course: "define, examine, and create different discourse modes (aural, visual, spatial, verbal, & linguistic) under rhetorical dimensions (audience, purpose, context)." It is not enough to lecture and teach students concepts and assess learning through quizzes, tests, or essays. Rather, the thrust of this outcome is that students gain proficiency with the internal logics and structures of both electronic and non-electronic composing and can define, evaluate, analyze, and create multimodally with attention to tactility.

When students begin the FabLab course project, lectures and discussions about the place of rhetoric, its connection with tactility, and culturally-situated practices of making objects with symbolic meaning emerge. Connecting theories of rhetoric with making objects in a FabLab requires readings, appropriate for an upper-level undergraduate audience, that specifically address how objects exert suasive forces upon other objects and people.

Thus, I found David Sheridan's "Fabricating Consent" an appropriate entry for students. Sheridan's thesis makes scholarly room to theorize how three-dimensional fabricated objects afford rhetors with four new types of rhetorical arguments arising from certain modes of communication. Specifically, in the literature review, Sheridan builds a case for teacher/scholars to consider how objects function rhetorically with, "... their own distinctive rhetorical power" (255). This savvy argument provides fertile ground for discussions with students about: a) the nature and being of rhetoric; and b) how objects operate in the spatial and gestural modes through interaction with other bodies and objects; and c) what forces objects bring to bear in environments.

While his work does not explicitly address the tactile nature of making, in my reading of his work an implicit stance emerges that the tactile mode is integral to making in his discussion of objects and their rhetorical affordances. In order to gain entry to the five modes of communication, one needs to use the sixth mode—the tactile mode—to interact with or create and form materials and objects. In conversation with Sheridan's work, I introduce students via lecture to Angela Haas' article, "Wampum as Hypertext," where she argues American Indians—in their use of wampum shells and other weaving materials to record alliances, ceremonies, treaties, and wars—were the first hypertext theorists and practitioners. American Indians create wampum hypertexts, according to Haas, through digital rhetoric, which she defines as "...refer[ring] to our fingers, our digits, one of the primary ways (along with our ears and eyes) through which we make sense of the world and with which we write into the world" (84).

While she does not explicitly name 'tactililty,' she makes a link through the definition with how people use fingers to 'make sense' (i.e. to receive and make tactile signals and memories). If the five modes communication—linguistic, visual, aural, gesture, and spatial—lead to what the New London Group called "...significant modes of meaning-making," (64) and the tactile sense leads to making meaning for people, then there are six modes of multimodality—not five. Teasing this nuance out for students also helps them experience how knowledge is co-constructed through conversation with scholarly work.

At the same time, this outcome is not the only reason I use Haas' scholarly work with students. There are two additional motives: 1) the recent history of makerspaces has been coded as cis-white-male, which excludes the centuries of practices of women homemakers and indigenous peoples; and 2) the racially and ethnically diverse student population of UT-Arlington calls upon me to integrate the constellation of methods and practices by many cultures. I also want to honor students own culturally-situated practices and encourage them to bring these practices with them into their coursework.

The design of this course, with an assignment that uses the university's FabLab, allows for students to make things that honor and respect their cultures and lifeworlds. Central to the theoretical design of this course, then, is a series of readings and discussions of counterpoints that synthesize several course goals. This synthesis allows students to intellectually and culturally engage with multiple viewpoints throughout the remaining semester.

Self-Assessment, Reflection, and Revision

The final two course goals help students learn revision, self-reflection, assessment, and collaboration—key practices for multimodal composition, especially if a student is new to creating multiple modes. For these practices, I rely upon the work in the edited textbook, *Multimodal Composition*. This resource provides multiple heuristics for students to use when they first design and prototype projects with unfamiliar hardware and software. Specifically, I select tables from the textbook, depending upon the nature of the assignment, to guide students toward self-reflection with their own technology use. These tables are especially helpful for those teachers who, like me, want students to build meta-awareness and critical thought from the failures and successes that emerge during multiple iterations of designing and re-designing a project. I also find that many of the tables can be modified and built upon for local contexts.

Guiding students along this path of meta-awareness and critical thought also serves a larger purpose in the course: assessment via grading. In teaching multimodal composition, I take Cheryl Ball's editorial pedagogy to heart, believing that students who do the work will perform exceedingly well in

terms of grading. I do this in the service of a larger belief that students need to know it is okay to fail in a classroom—and to fail often—especially when learning how to compose in new modes. It is often the multiple failures that teach the most valuable lessons.

Supporting this belief is assessment that rewards labor not the product of the labor. The labor-based assessment takes into account the labor performed on projects via weekly progress reports, weekly check-in discussions with students, and students' accounts of the work performed for each stage of each assignment. This may remind some readers of Asao Inoue's labor-based grading contacts; however, at the time I ran ENGL 3374, in Summer 2015, Fall 2015, and Fall 2016, I was unaware of Inoue's teaching practices with labor-based grading. That said, in reviewing his 2019 publication on the topic, a full integration of the theories and practices he espouses would fit well within the scope of this course design. I think so for two reasons: first, I find merit in his argument that single dominant standard assessment grading leads to White language supremacy; second, I believe, with Inoue, that measuring labor benefits students, because students take responsibility for articulating their own labor practices and account for—in an empowering manner—how their labor meets the learning goals of the course. The assessment via grading learning outcome of the course thus asks students to develop and maintain meta-awareness and reflective accounts of their progress on projects and to document their own learning progress. This includes successes, failures, and their labor in process.

The design of the course weaves together theory with practice to situate students' learning, regardless of what knowledge of multimodal composition with which they begin. It also promotes multimodal creation, development, and distribution as a valued form of representation of thoughts alongside essayistic traditions. The structure of the course introduces students to multimodality across a range of learning outcomes; the guiding philosophy urges students to see the instructor as a guide or mentor who has specialized knowledge and respects students' personal ways of coming to knowledge. The tables from *Multimodal Composition* show this philosophy in practice, as does Haas' comparison of wampum to hypertext.

In putting the theory into practice, my assumptions was that students would have experience encountering and interacting with multimodal composition but would also need explicit assurance feeling comfortable with failure when designing and prototyping projects. Thus, building in activities help students practice meta-awareness and self-reflection of learning are key to this course design.

Critical Reflection

Each iteration of the course resulted in varied feedback from students—with the second run of the course tending toward more positive reactions and feedback, and the third tending toward more teaching failures and students' expressions of feeling overwhelmed and uncomfortable with failure. It is this third run of the course which invites opportunity to discuss teaching failures and gives significance to the field of writing studies.

The first few weeks of the 15-week semester proved challenging in terms of student buy-in to theories and practices to which the literary-studies focused English undergraduate curriculum had not previously exposed them. Despite the careful introduction of readings and lectures on multimodal composition, during one particularly memorable class session, five students experienced dissonance toward material and lectures learned in other courses.

Defining Text: Rhetoric and Composition Versus Literary Studies

During one lecture, I introduced the term "text" and defined it through Arola, Sheppard, and Ball's expanded definition in *Writer/Designer*. One student immediately responded with a reference to a literature colleague's definition of text as, "printed words on a page only" and followed-up with other remarks about the wrongness of the definition to which I introduced the class. Four other students chimed in with support for text being printed words only. This moment brought lecture to a halt. I explained that, perhaps the colleague in Literature—whose training in literary studies—probably held this definition of text, those in Rhetoric and Composition (and in the sub-field of Computers and Writing) tended toward the more expansive definition. I explained that this was due to research on multimodality emerging from the New London Group, with subsequent scholars building upon this work to open writing studies toward many modes of communication. Interestingly, as another student shared during discussion, some students read this as a progressive movement in English studies, one that the "conservative curriculum" of the English program at UT-Arlington did not integrate in other courses. Since this iteration of the course held class once a week for 2 hours and 50 minutes, and I began class with lecture (and was only able to progress in for ten minutes before this moment), I elected to spend the next hour and a half with students discussing their experiences with the curriculum and their thoughts about text and multimodality.

While I would like to report that I found this discussion enriching, I left course that day with the following questions: "Why did I get hired here? What do I have to contribute? What do I have to offer students?" I also felt like I did not have adequate exposure to the culture of the undergraduate program

to prepare me for how to integrate multimodality with students enrolled in this course.

This feeling of alienation from my turf left me professionally bruised. I had not read the culture of the BA curriculum. Nor did I complete my homework on previous course offerings through the undergraduate course descriptions posted each semester, where I could have gleaned important information on how to frame multimodal composition to students whose primary production relied upon years of a well-honed craft: the alphabetic essay.

If I had done my homework, I would have seen that my course design, however innovative, clashed with student expectations of a course in a literary-studies focused general English education curriculum. While I would not have changed the course assignments, I would have delivered lectures and activities with different strategies, including discussing the role of a multimodal composition course in a literary studies focused BA English curriculum and how the projects in the course compared and contrasted with projects in other courses. While dusting off my disaffection for my teaching approach in the course, I had to forge ahead with the course projects and remind students of the time and labor involved in creating multimodal works; I had to assure them that it is okay to fail, while I felt I failed the students.

I noticed during the first project of the course that some students tended to work up against the deadline for projects, which left them fatigued about the unexpected labor needed to complete the assignment. Thus, with the second, larger project, I redesigned deadlines to allow for five smaller deadlines so that when students neared the major deadline for the project, smaller portions of the work—abstract, prototypes, reflection, photographs with captions—were completed and needed to be reassembled and revised for a coherent and polished final submission. During the second course project, students reported greater sensitivity toward failure: some believed that failure to design or compose their project as imagined (especially given the products of their labors) correlated to a poor assignment grade. On a weekly basis, I disabused them of this destructive notion through sharing stories and images of my failures first learning how to compose multimodally as a graduate student. In my mind, I thought I was promoting a non-shame based culture in the classroom by showing my early attempts—and then my later polished and published projects—to illustrate how developing the literacies for multimodality takes time, patience, practice—and most importantly humility.

The weekly stories and sharing of failures did seem to help students feel more comfortable and less overwhelmed about developing their projects. Some students reported relief in seeing that even professors sometimes fail to produce intended results. The same students also shared seeing the quality and number of attempts to produce a multimodal project helped them realize expectations

for their own work. I began to perceive that tangled in the anxiety of learning multiliteracies and new hardware and software were imaginings of highly polished compositions—the kind of quality that an advertising agency might produce in a digital campaign. Once students understood my expectations for production were far from a professional production, most seemed relaxed and more willing to dive into uncharted composition territory.

At the same time, an interesting observation emerged with a focus on composing both in-class and out-of-class on a near weekly basis. On the class meetings where we discussed course readings, especially ones where students could connect theoretical texts from other courses into ENGL 3374, students became animated and rather lively during discussion. However, on the class meetings where in-class composition with new software and techniques occurred, the room seemed less spirited. Of course, large-class discussion presents rather unique benefits and constraints for those who participate in the ways they choose. In my broad experiences outside of this course, it seems that (on average) three or four students tend to speak more often with others remaining silent observers. This was not the case in ENGL 3374. It was common to have approximately 50 to 75% of students speak with aplomb during class discussion. When students focused on composition individually or in pairs, however, the same energy receded. I suspect this occurred because of two motivations. First, students had practiced and performed in class discussion in their other English courses with faculty expectation that students would engage verbally during discussion of the concepts or themes from the books assigned in courses. Because this practice emerged as a featured cultural habit of the undergraduate program, students participated with gusto. Second, as students learned how to compose with new modes and new software and hardware with which they were not readily familiar, the cognitive load for entering a new composition space required greater demand with new neuro-pathway development. Thus, the barrier to entry was higher and required a good deal of effort and labor and new type of intellectual work. My observation, while anecdotal, does support Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe's acknowledgement that composing with multimodal elements requires an intellectual demand unlike composing in one mode only (2008).

Students also drew on familiar, already developed skills when working with the sixth mode of multimodality, tactility. For some students, sketching ideas and thinking through the spatial environments their projects would inhabit provided focus, because these traits had previously been developed in other areas of their life domains (e.g. through personal hobbies or art classes). Once students realized that previously acquired skills could be useful for this course and that multimodality was not such a foreign concept—only a term and definitions for things they've already known— some of them relaxed and

seemed to enjoy working on the projects more. When we discussed putting the theory of multimodality into practice with each project, students commented on how the focus on tactility helped them to make sense of the world around them, and they saw tactility as an integral part of multimodal composition.

When students began working with multiple modes for the FabLab project—the second assignment of the course that asked students to create an object using the hardware and software of the university's FabLab to solve a problem on campus—time management became an issue for some students, regardless of my attempts to make smaller deadlines. A couple of students working full-time and a part-time jobs alongside schoolwork, designed their schedules for attending classes—even being on campus—with great care to maximize time. Additionally, since UT-Arlington's campus is within the 4th largest metropolitan area in the United States and the majority of students live off-campus, it is common to have student commute times exceed one hour each way. What I did not anticipate in asking students to use the FabLab was the extreme burden this would place upon one student, in particular, whose commute time each way was approximately 45-50 minutes; for this one student, time on campus was only for classes, with the rest of this student's time allocated for their full-time job and personal life.

While some class time was allocated to work on the FabLab project, it was not enough time to complete a project; the number of hours involved with iterative design meant that much of the designing and prototyping had to occur outside class time. A few other students did not anticipate how much time would be needed not only to learn new hardware and software but also how much time it would take some hardware—like a 3D printing device—to manufacture the object. No matter how much class time I allocated for students to work on their projects or mini-deadlines I set or weekly verbal and email reminders I made about completing work early due to the number of hours needed, a few students experienced barriers that delayed their work—and admitted as much during the reflective writing process. Lest readers think students were procrastinating, I assure you that stalling did not happen. Rather, these three students understood how to organize their work and time for an alphabetic essay; but multimodal composition was uncharted territory in terms of organization.

Assumptions I held about transferable skills from alphabetic essay production bubbled toward the surface of my thoughts, fast. I realized a grave error in my thinking—skills learned in alphabetic essay production may not transfer when learning multimodal composition because the cognitive load of organizing, arranging, and designing many modes can be overwhelming. Effectively teaching multimodal composition, I have learned, requires teaching all of the base skills for multimodal composition with no room for assumptions of

transferable skills for some students, because students' own time management strategies may not account for the layered, distributed, and dynamic iterative design of multimodality.

Final Thoughts

Since the last course offering, in Fall 2017, I have yet to teach ENGL 3374 again. I would like to say that I stopped offering the course because the department required me to teach other courses, but that is only partially true. I could have offered this course again. Really, I needed a break. I needed time to assess the intellectual culture of the curriculum. The pivotal lesson I learned as a new faculty member, eager to offer a course steeped in theories and practices of multimodality I had read about for years as both a masters and doctoral student, included reading the local conditions of a curriculum before offering innovative courses. I learned that I needed to talk to colleagues, read syllabi, learn colleagues' pedagogical approaches in the classroom, and most importantly, talk to undergraduate and graduate students about their experiences with coursework.

Given the many valuable lessons learned from this course, I remain convinced that the FabLab project provides value to writing studies writ large by focusing our attention on the theory/practice of the sixth mode of multimodality—tactility. Tactility focuses attention on the immediate sensations of feeling different textures of objects and thus works for electronic and non-electronic multimodal compositions. It is especially effective when engaging with non-electronic texts. I know of many excellent teacher/scholars who integrate non-electronic multimodal composition in their classes, including Kristin Arola, Lisa Blansett, Regina Duthley, and Krystin Gollihue (just to name a few), and I suspect that, in addition, to the design thinking and theory/praxis they each integrate, tactility is implicit in their instruction. Future teaching and research into tactility, however, could locate a sixth mode of multimodality by embracing both the logics and the emotions that govern tactile experiences. Possible avenues for theory building may include transdisciplinary research available from several fields and disciplines, including health sciences (how the body processes touch), anthropology (how bodies use felt senses in cultures), sociology (how bodies address felt senses socially), and rhetorical studies (how bodies interact and commune with felt sense) as starting points. A robust theory/practice for tacility, however, might include a course design themed on the sixth mode with students enrolled researching, defining, and theorizing this integral mode for composing. It is my hope that a reader of this course design, perhaps one of the next generation of scholars and teachers, picks up on this thread and develops a robust course and research trajectory in this area.

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