

English 382: Special Topics in Multimodal Composition

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English 382 is a multimodal composition course that counts as a “C” credit, a composition course that fulfills one of the courses mandated as general education requirements.¹ The writing program administration at the university created this course as one in a series of four new multimodal composition courses in response to increasing scholarship on the connections between transfer and multimodality (DePalma). English 382 is described in the University of Washington’s course catalogue as a course whose “topics vary” because each iteration “focuses on emerging questions, debates, genres, and methods of multimodal analysis and production.” This iteration of English 382 considered the multimodal nature of feminist research methodologies, writing practices, and design strategies through a class-wide simulation of a feminist grassroots organization.

Institutional Context

English 382 was taught in Fall 2017 at the University of Washington, a large, public university whose undergraduate students most often are STEM-focused.² English 382, like all courses, functioned within institutional affordances and constraints: our classroom layout, technology available in class, and course requirements shaped the trajectory of the course. Capped at 23, our course had fifteen students enrolled. This allowed for a smaller class community, which aided in community building and dialogue. Further aiding in class community-building, the class met twice a week for two hours, once in a computer classroom with desks arranged in three-person pods and the other in a traditional classroom with desks and attached chairs that rolled to create mini-groups easily. The material conditions in each space promoted collaboration, both because of the materials within the classrooms and the frequent in-class use of collaborative digital mediums. However, there were some drawbacks within the institutional context that affected collaboration and overall

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

2. The most popular majors, according to the Office of the Registrar, are science, technology, engineering, or math related in the last five years. For example, in Autumn 2017—the quarter this version of English 382 course was taught—the five most popular undergrad majors were (in order of most to least popular) Computer Science, Psychology, Business Administration, Biochemistry, Electrical Engineering, and Business Administration (Finance).

course success. The course had no pre-requisites, which meant there was no shared knowledge, and the institution was on the quarter system, and thus, we had ten weeks for the course. This expedited time frame made it challenging to cultivate a class community, set up the theoretical framework necessary, select and become familiar with a social justice issue, brainstorm rhetorical responses to that issue within the university community, and provide enough time for students to execute those responses successfully. This was particularly complicated given that English 382 was marked as “writing intensive,” meaning students were tasked with completing a minimum word count by the end of the course that averaged “three to four pages per week.”³

To capitalize on affordances and work within limitations, the course instructor—Jaclyn Fiscus-Cannaday—designed course assignments that helped simulate feminist grassroots organizing, which the course broadly defined as working with local community to address feminist social issues. All quarter, students were working toward a final project, which required students communicate with a public of their choice about a class-selected social justice issue. This assignment gave the class an opportunity to showcase their work, as well as practice in-person activism. In order to scaffold for this final project, there were four shorter assignments throughout the semester, which consisted of:

1. Reflections: Students created a biweekly reflection to a common prompt in a medium of their choosing and shared them with a partner. These reflection prompts were designed to promote transfer of knowledge, foster the feminist value of reflexivity, build community, and receive feedback on ideas for other assignments.
2. An ideation assignment: Students began brainstorming for the cause of the class’s feminist grassroots organization by authoring a children’s book about a feminist issue of each student’s choice. This assignment served as a practical application of the multimodal and feminist theory taught in the first weeks of the course, as well as a way for students to explore ideas for what would become the class’s overall social issue of choice.
3. An assignment that invited them to share expertise with each other: Students selected one of three choices, emulating how labor might be divided amongst teams or individuals within a grassroots campaign outside of the classroom:
 - a. A pitch of what the social justice topic should be for the

3. Though there is not an official policy listed on the registrar website, the student guidelines for the Expository Writing Program explain, “The minimum writing requirement for our “C” classes is 7,500 words submitted, of which at least 3,600 must be graded.”

- final project,
- b. Three annotations for the class annotated bibliography, which was used as a collective research archive to help students with their final project, or
 - c. A design worksheet that could be used to help students with their final projects.
4. An assignment that required them to know themselves as learners and coordinate with others: Students were tasked to create a self-designed project meant to support the class's final project goals. The assignment could be done individually or in groups. This assignment was meant to mimic the kind of collaboration necessary within grassroots organizing, as well as teaching the kind of self-sponsored scaffolding that often occurs in the workplace.

To see the pacing of these assignments and the readings that were assigned in support of them, see the course calendar in the syllabus online on the *Composition Studies* website (<https://compstudiesjournal.com/>).

In addition to the typical institutional constraints, this course was held in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, amidst the influx of explicitly queer-phobic, racist, sexist, and xenophobic rhetoric both nationally and on University of Washington's campus. One of the most prominent examples of this on campus occurred in early 2017. A Resident Student Organization sponsored Milo Yiannopoulos, a Breitbart news pundit, to hold a talk on campus on inauguration night, January 20, 2017. Leading up to the event, the university's student-run newspaper, *The Daily*, chronicled the debate amongst students about how to distinguish free speech from hate speech (Ross), and tensions grew so high that there was a Change.org petition, signed by over 4,000 people, to ban Yiannopoulos from campus. President Ana Mari Cauce ultimately allowed the event to go forward, emailing all faculty, staff, and students to announce her decision and cautioning them to avoid campus if possible. Protests and counter-protests staged outside the event, and the tensions between them erupted, resulting in Joshua Dukes getting shot as he attempted to break up a conflict. Those charged with his assault, Marc and Elizabeth Hokoana, were there with "intent to provoke altercations with protesters," based on prior messages uncovered during the investigation (Carter). Alan-Michael Weatherford, a graduate student who protested the university's hosting of Yiannopoulos by hosting peaceful teach-ins across from where the event took place, was subsequently doxed, harassed, libeled, and sent death threats by right-wing supporters (Weatherford). Students were outraged with the university's failure to ensure the safety of students—both graduate and undergraduate—amidst the increasingly dangerous campus climate (Ross; Weatherford).

This was the campus-environment that permeated the University of Washington at the time this course was developed and consequently taught: (1) the high political tension; (2) the heated debates over the idea of free speech; and, (3) the fear that many marginalized students carried with them to class that they could be a victim of harassment or violence. English 382 offered students an opportunity to explore and discuss issues related to intersectional feminism in a safe environment that might otherwise remain unavailable to them. Simultaneously, it provided the educational opportunity to practice grassroots advocacy that the University of Washington desperately needed, and continues to need.

Theoretical Rationale

In response to the dangerous rhetoric happening at the university, Fiscus-Cannaday wanted to develop a course that would simulate the kind of feminist grassroots organizing that was happening nationally with The Women's March and social media campaigns like #metoo. Fiscus-Cannaday then began contemplating how feminist pedagogy—combined with influences from transfer studies, rhetorical genre studies, and simulation practice—might work to emulate the kind of feminist grassroots organizing students were watching nationally and provide an opportunity for students to practice this kind of grassroots organizing in their local context. Feminist collections, anthologies, and manuscripts have “come to occupy canonical, yet transformative discussions within our [composition studies] discipline” (Lee and Nickoson), and this course emerged from that rich lineage (e.g. Jarratt and Worsham; Kirsch et al.; Royster and Kirsch; Schell and Rawson). In this iteration of feminist pedagogy, Fiscus-Cannaday was primarily concerned with doing more with less, a pressure many of us face in our writing classes today (Welch and Scott), so she chose to not use the service learning model that other feminist social activism courses have used (Godbee; Williams), nor did she employ a computer mediated system (Russell and Fisher). Rather, Fiscus-Cannaday considered the long history of composition classes to analyze or participate in progressive social action (Adler-Kassner et al.; Fleckenstein) by asking students to engage in a topic of their choosing and then having students work together to create an organization that inspired change within the local community on the university's campus and the surrounding Seattle area called the “university district.” The students elected the topic of climate change refugees, and then created an organization called the Movement for Climate Refugee Awareness (MCRA). Assignments and in-class activities prompted students to act as professional colleagues of the MCRA, creating public-facing and professional genres for the MCRA, in the hopes that students would learn things like genre, rhetorical, and audience awareness.

In asking students to create professional and public-facing genres on behalf of the MCRA instead of creating “mutt genres” (Wardle) like writing research papers about climate change, Fiscus-Cannaday hoped that the course would fit into national conversations about facilitating knowledge transfer (Baird and Dilger). Fiscus-Cannaday hoped that students could transfer in knowledge about writing as they understood it from feminist grassroots organizing in their lives; build upon their own academic writerly knowledge as they produced in new genres for new audiences and rhetorical purposes; and then be prepared to transfer the writerly knowledge they gained from doing class work to future situations. To facilitate transfer in these new writing situations and prepare them for future transfer, students were tasked to reflect, or “[recall] writing experiences to reframe the current writing situation” (Taczak 78), through biweekly, multi-genred reflections because reflection is “identified as a key move in the transfer of writing knowledge and practice” (Yancey 303). Students were tasked to select a genre of their choice to reflect through because traditional reflection-in-presentation texts often lead to students putting forth a claim about the rhetorical effectiveness of one’s own work (Greene; Sommers; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak).

Fiscus-Cannaday most wanted students to practice and transfer the threshold concept of writing studies that writing is socially situated (Adler-Kasner and Wardle), so her course design was heavily influenced by rhetorical genre studies (see, for example, Bawarshi; Bawarshi and Reiff). Studying genre uptake explicitly can help illuminate how genres circulate (Bawarshi; Fisher; Emmons; Rounsaville; Roundtree) because it allows students to explore either the complicated process of considering potential genre productions or the cause-and-effect relationship between genre production (Fiscus). Therefore, Fiscus-Cannaday used these qualities of genre-based instruction – how it can help students understand writing as socially situated and see genres as interconnected to the materials, technologies, and people from which they emerge – and connected them to simulation practice, a practice often used for students emulate a situation from a future professional career like doing simulations of patient care to learn nursing charting (Campbell). The kind of pedagogy Fiscus-Cannaday employed hoped to emulate the kind of networked activity within organizations that Clay Spinuzzi has documented so students can be rhetorically effective in similar companies in future workplace situations. In essence, Fiscus-Cannaday hoped her combination of feminist pedagogy, transfer-oriented course design, genre-based instruction, and simulation practice would work together to make the classroom a site of resistance for the institutional context from which this course emerged.

Critical Reflection

For this critical reflection, we begin with a conversation between ourselves as authors—the teacher for the course and a student who took the course—to consider the extent to which English 382 accomplished Fiscus-Cannaday’s goals. We hope this conversational style about our own reactions to our course might illuminate our own experiences more clearly. Then, we end with our collective thoughts on how teachers can foster spaces for collective social activism within a formal, academic environment.

Fiscus-Cannaday: Initial Takeaways

I think my biggest takeaway is that writing classrooms can be a space of resistance but that simulating grassroots activism is much more difficult than I anticipated. As a compositionist and feminist, I am so proud that our classroom was used to create real, public-facing texts that were created to inform our local community about the climate refugee crisis. The class’s final projects—taken collectively as a co-authored Facebook page, zine, short documentary, and collection of flyers—were all exceptional writing. And, I was most impressed by the way that the class worked together in collective social action: distributing the zine and short documentary on the Facebook page, along with organizing an event through the distribution of flyers to share the documentary and zine. It showed the potential for classrooms to educate a university community about a kairotic social issue and encourage social change. I do believe this course could be done in another context successfully, but I would caution practitioners to keep in mind their own identities, the identities of their students, and the institutional context as they consider the adaptability of this course design.

At UW, I was incredibly nervous about teaching this course because the political climate at our institution was fraught with division and tension. I felt uncomfortable tasking a group of students to work together to resist hateful rhetoric when I was unsure if they themselves espoused or supported it. However, as a white, cis-gender woman, I have the privilege to facilitate resistance work without aspects of my own identity being targeted. I think this position of power, along with the theoretical tools provided early on in the quarter about rhetorical listening, feminist collaboration, and usability in multimodal design, helped mitigate the risks of this kind of pedagogy. But, I do not think it was risk-free. If teachers tried this pedagogy and did not embody the kinds of privilege I hold or had a different collection of students, teachers might experience harmful emotional or even physiological violence when doing this kind of pedagogy, much like the doxing that happened to other instructors on UW’s campus. And, I could have unintentionally put students at risk for becoming

unofficial spokespeople for a problem, much like students of color are often looked to when in a predominately white classroom talking about race. In this iteration of English 382, for instance, I had to be especially cognizant of that, as climate change refugees are disproportionately international people of color.

In general, I do think the course was successful in providing students with tools for engaging with their community about issues they cared about while enrolled in my course, but my goal of simulating grassroots activism was not all together successful. In evaluations, students reported how the course material decolonized their conceptions of what counts as writing and saw writing as a form of social action, but they did not talk about how this course had inspired them to do social activism outside of class. Moreover, students did not choose to continue our social activist work after the quarter was over, despite agreeing to do so when we discussed next steps at the end of the course.

Watson: Response to Fiscus-Cannaday's Takeaways

I would agree, in part, with your assessment. Yes, writing classrooms can function as resistance to our political environment, and what we produced as a class did that work. However, my lasting impression of this course is how it served as resistance to how we typically understand writing. As a Law, Societies, and Justice major with a background of classes in the University of Washington's Gender, Women, and Sexualities Studies and English department, this course intrigued me. When the syllabus was handed out on the first day, I was sold: a non-traditional approach to both grading and the classic English/Composition class formula was refreshing after years of traditional academia. The idea that English as a subject no longer needed to be bound by the strict formulas drilled into my mind from a young age was new and exciting. Being able to bring my personal love of art and passion for activism to the classroom was a new occurrence. With each assignment, I had the opportunity to express myself and convey my message through new forms. Furthermore, I discovered the importance of using multimodality and breaking down the often classist hierarchy inherent in academic and activist circles. Though, I will introduce a caveat that as a white, cis-gendered woman who identified as a feminist prior to the beginning of the course, the topics we approached were less "risky" for me. This meant that I felt comfortable openly speaking in front of the class in ways other students may not have. Alongside that same vein, I was not afraid of being a personal victim of the oft racially based violence escalating on campus.

Today, I use this feminist take on classic composition for my writing in other classes and internship work. The idea that a "paper" doesn't necessarily have to be argumentative is something I'm particularly taken with; my essays no longer center on trying to "win" a debate, but rather evolve through my

analysis of opposing views. Alongside this is my newfound consideration of accessibility in my own work, and that knowledge—especially feminist research—can and should be conveyed in multiple formats to reach the often-ignored groups it centers around.

Therefore, I agree your second goal of simulating grassroots organizing was not entirely successful. We were all too nervous or too polite to choose an idea we were passionate about, and in the end, chose to focus on an issue that was not personally affecting any of us in the classroom. Despite the tense political climate at the time, the University of Washington remains a predominantly liberal campus. As this class was marketed as a feminist approach to multi-modal composition, it's unlikely that anyone with strongly held oppositional views to the course's content would admit to holding those opinions within the environment cultivated within the classroom. Instead, we settled on an amalgamation of the proposed subjects in the pitches, which most of us had little-to-no background in, in order to avoid rejecting each other's proposal. We eventually named the amalgamation the "Movement for Climate Refugee Awareness," but there were still at least three separate collaborative projects—a Facebook page, a short documentary, and a zine—and all of these genres allowed people to work outside of class individually. In my opinion, we approached our collaborative campaign as individualized projects due to the fact that we were in a University setting. Everyone had different responsibilities to juggle, and it was far easier to manage our own projects and compile them together, rather than working on a text alongside our classmates. Furthermore, from my perspective, everyone simply put different levels of effort in the work they produced for this class. Combined with the fact that not many people seemed particularly passionate about the topic we chose, it led to our collective action project appearing a bit disjointed – a collection of texts about a similar topic rather than a simulation of a grassroots social activist movement.

Fiscus-Cannaday's Response

Yes, I agree. I saw these things happening and tried to circumvent the challenges you describe in various ways, but my efforts were not successful. I learned that creating a sense of community that goes beyond the classroom is incredibly challenging. The writing and sharing of our children's books before deciding on a topic, for example, was my attempt to foster a community of writers. When I saw the collaborative writing projects splinter into individually written elements, I encouraged the class came to come up with accountability and collaboration measures—and we did with both a Slack channel and a tracking system on our shared Google Drive for visualizing project development—but these measures were hardly ever utilized. The collaborative nature of the campaign often took place because I scheduled it in class

with group work and whole class conversations. Next time I teach a course like this, I would use the grading contract again—this seemed to be one of the things that made this course work—while also adding requirements to the contract that incentivizes the use of participating in the accountability measures. And, I would make that group work, whole group class discussion, and assignments function more explicitly as a simulation of grassroots organizing. I would also make it clearer how the writing assignments, especially the pitch, the shared research, the one-page design worksheet, and the scaffolding assignments map onto realistic practices in a grassroots activism movement. Because our collaborative work was framed as group check-in time and assignments were thought of as academic-only situations, students did not see this course as an opportunity to practice the grassroots activist skills necessary for them to be prepared to do this work on their own outside of class, and therefore they did not learn grassroots activism skills to transfer to their future situations.

Collective Takeaways

As an instructor and student who have used genre-based instruction and classroom as simulation pedagogy to do social activist work within the academy, we can attest that the classroom has the potential to stage resistance against the nationalist, hate-filled rhetoric omnipresent about immigration and other issues as they arise. However, we can equally account for – and warn – that there are inherent limitations of using the classroom as a simulation for grassroots organizing. Classroom dynamics are situated within the discourse archive of the academy, which draws boundaries on who is invited to participate in social action and how that social action might naturally occur. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that the students who elect to take such a class will align with the foundational ideals of the course. Even widely assumed “liberal spaces” like the university setting have faced frequent – and occasionally violent – political clashes, which make it risky but crucial to establish activist environments in academic spaces in this politically tumultuous time. A class like this provides an opportunity for students to practice activism and prepares them for potential activist work outside the academy. Not only that, but it can encourage students to take stock of their role in higher education and question the traditional hierarchy and inaccessibility of academia.

From our experience, we think this course can be adapted for other contexts and we have recommendations for how to best do so. In creating a course like this for your own context, we recommend the following:

1. Consider the identities you have and how they may come under attack in this kind of context. Consider ways of protecting yourself and mitigating those risks. It is possible that the risks outweigh the potential of teaching a similar course.
2. Use contract grading that aligns with the goals of this course. For example, this course required self-sponsored learning and revised assignments for a 4.0 because of its transfer-oriented goals, but could have done better in adding requirements that would have fostered class community because of its feminist goals. Know that contract grading is essential to the course's pedagogy, as it was consistently cited as the main reason that the collaborative nature of this course worked. Students noted that contract grading made it so they were not worried about how their grade would be affected by another's quality of work, nor were they worried to take risks and try new kinds of writing that was required in the course.
3. Create real-life simulations on some class days rather than assigning group work so that the collaborative writing is more enmeshed and transferable for future activist experiences. For example, students could create specific job titles for themselves and host meetings where they enact their professional personas, or each class could start with a "morning stand up" practice that many companies use now. Similarly, frame writing assignments as simulations for activist work rather than responses to prompts.
4. Consider putting a course like this in tandem with an existing knowledge-building framework, like pre-requisites, another disciplinary course, or service learning experience. This, we believe, would allow more time to not only build the foundational knowledge of activism and multimodality, but lead to more investment in the chosen topic if it's discussed and researched together as a class. If this is not possible, we would suggest trying to pick a topic immediately, instead of weeks into the class.

Overall, an organic, grassroots campaign about a collective issue will never be perfectly simulated in a university setting. This does not mean, however, that a class like this cannot be an impactful and worthwhile experience. As both a student and instructor who have experienced this course, we hope you can take from our successes and build from our failures as you design your own courses to stage resistance.

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