

Pedagogy Proceedings from the College English Association's 2017 Conference: Islands

No Teacher is an Island: Strategies for Enacting Multimodal Pedagogies

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My paper, in keeping with the theme of the College English Association's 2017 conference, is focused on how, as teachers, we need to build bridges, explore new territory, and avoid professional isolation—especially in regard to modern, multimodal literacies, a source of unending questions and frustrations for me, and I don't think I am alone. So, I will tell you a little bit about me to get us started: I have been teaching first-year composition for the past six years, mostly as a graduate student but also as an adjunct for a while. I have a background in literature, which still holds a special place in my heart, and which led me to where I am. I assumed that my training in literary studies is what prepared me to teach composition, which is somewhat true. But as a composition teacher, a communication teacher, I have come to understand how my own background (training) has left me unprepared to teach some of the skills that scholars are suggesting I should.

In 2016, I presented at the CEA conference in Denver, where I spoke about one of the difficulties facing teachers that want to teach multimodal curricula. I explained that our own inexperience with skills and technologies associated with multimodality place us in an uncomfortable position, a position that requires us to rethink the work we are doing and whether

we are the people to do it. Many of us have never been trained in visual composition or in computer languages. So, when we try to bring these into the classroom, we are certain to face high levels of discomfort—and doubt. But I am convinced that literacy means more than traditional text and our teaching practices and professional development must account for a much broader definition of writing instruction. Over the past year, I have spent time learning skills, theories, and technologies in an attempt to overcome that discomfort and I want to tell you about that and suggest a few strategies that may be helpful.

Where I am Coming From

To explain what I have been learning and why I want to first describe my institutional context. You may come from an institution that has different expectations and resources, and I want to carefully explain why I focused on the skills I have been working on. At Iowa State University, our composition courses use what we refer to as a WOVE curriculum, which stands for Written, Oral, Visual, and Electronic communication. Having this curriculum challenges us to create assignments that facilitate a deep understanding of communication that can be transferred between not only communicative tasks but also communicative modes. We ask students to write a research paper and translate that into a brochure or poster, we have students rhetorically analyze visual arguments and websites, we spend more time discussing rhetorical choices made in presenting and tying that to writing. We attempt to encourage critical engagement with communicative acts, no matter what form they take.

A key development for us is our implementation of ePortfolios. ePortfolios are particularly exciting to me, as they provide spaces for students to develop and showcase a range of communicative practices. The ISUComm ePortfolio platform has been developed, implemented, and sustained over the last 5 years or so at Iowa State (Lutz, O’Connell, et al.; Lutz, Blakely, et al.). There are other institutions with similar initiatives, and we are seeing what are effectively student-run educational websites. The WOVE curricula and ePortfolios are ways of teaching a broad set of communication practices, but by bringing these practices and skills together in one space we are highlighting the similarities between them. Yes, making distinctions between oral and visual communication can be useful, but bringing them into a single composition course presupposes a consistency in theory and practice. Rhetorical theory applies nicely to each skill and project, and the similarities between written, oral, visual, and electronic forms of communication seem more significant than their differences. If composition is generally known as a writing class, and we recognize that all writing is multimodal (Ball and Charlton), then we need to consider that modern writing requires a broad set of skills.

What do I Teach?

When I started teaching, having received a degree in English, I thought I knew what writing was...But as it turns out, I was a bit naïve. Experience now shows that I had a very limited idea of what it meant to read and write because reading and writing now encompasses a much wider range of activities than I had been trained to believe. Andrea Lunsford’s keynote

address from 2005 to the Computers and Writing Conference is a great indication of what I mean. Writing, according to Lunsford, is

A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media. (Lunsford 171)

Lunsford's new definition of writing applies to a broad set of communication strategies as frameworks that allow us to develop and share ideas. I like this definition because it seems to line up with the critical thinking learning outcomes that are important to many writing programs and it shows that we, as writing instructors, can draw on a wide range of tools and skills to meet our goals. And this modern definition was a long time in the making. Computers and Composition scholars have been working for decades to better understand the relationship between technology and writing, culminating in Cynthia Selfe's infamous plea in the late 90's that composition scholars 'pay attention' to the role of computers (Selfe). Similarly, the 1996 publication of the New London Groups manifesto on new literacies provided an extensive discussion on the importance of broadening our understanding of literacy (The New London Group).

As exciting as I find the possibilities, I also worry about how prepared I am to teach certain literacy skills to my students. And I worry about how well prepared my colleagues are, many of whom have similar training and similar interests. We want to have conversations about

communication, and rhetoric, and the human condition. Yet we struggle to explain how the internet works, what servers are, the magic of Photoshop, and even document design. To think about the relationship between image, text, speech, and gesture we must know more about writing.

If we take a look through some of the ways teachers are taking on multimodality in practice, we can get a better sense of the training we would need to cover it all.

Looking through articles published in the CEA Forum, which is, of course, the CEA's journal focused on teaching and learning, shows a variety of approaches taken by instructors that require us to think through our own skills as communicators. Based on a few recent articles and discussions with other teachers, I now know that writing means more. Writing instruction includes:

- Cartooning
- Printmaking
- Etchings
- Choral Music
- Photo Editing
- Poster and Brochure Design
- Data Display
- And more

Mary Anne Myers uses Cartooning as an exercise for teaching the poetry of Emily Dickinson (Myers). Staci Stone writes about an interdisciplinary writing project that pairs her students research about phobias with art students who interpret the research to make prints (Stone).

Megan Keaton teaches about the affordances of different modes using an assignment centered on William Blake's "The Tyger" (Keaton). Talking to other teachers, I know that teachers talk about photos and photo editing as part of rhetorical analysis, poster and brochure design to discuss research and audience awareness, data displays to talk about information accuracy, and the line between data as fact and data as a persuasive tool.

I don't mean to imply that we all need to teach cartooning AND printmaking AND etching AND various forms of music AND whatever else we can think of. That clearly isn't going to be the case. But I do want to reflect on the fact that my own training leading up to teaching writing courses did not involve any of this (or at least not in a way that I recognize as writing and communication instruction). What I am left with are questions about how best to incorporate new modes, media, technologies, and skills into a writing process that will be most beneficial. And one thing I can say for sure is that I need to develop my own communication skills in a few areas if I am fully able to embrace multimodality. I need to know more about visual and oral communication as it is practiced today.

Writing Instruction that Matters

We don't want to just pick an activity and run with it because it seems like a fun idea. We need ways to build these skills into the theory and practice of writing and communicating that

connects meaningfully to the other skills and techniques we teach. Making these activities rhetorical, for example, and not discrete activities. Lunsford talks about the fear that administrators might see the inclusion of a visual assignment as “teaching PowerPoint” instead of teaching higher level communication skills (Lunsford 176), and we should all carefully consider how well we are integrating technology into our courses. New skills and technologies need to be contextualized and understood as enabling and constraining communication and not as virtuous on their own.

Still, I am left with practical questions. How many and which assignments? How much time should we spend learning the theory and the underlying principles that make up different communicative acts? Which skills will my students develop beyond traditional text, and how well will they develop those skills? We can’t spend our whole semester on Photoshop, can we? No, certainly not. How much do I need to learn before teaching a new skill, and how ought I go about it? And, most importantly, what can I learn and how long will it take me? Answering this last question, I hope, will help us focus on what we can accomplish, instead of freezing, in the face of so many difficult questions.

How to Do More

The many challenges that come with a broadening of a discipline seem to share the common problem of how to do more than we were before. We were already responsible for knowing and teaching a staggering variety of content, so where do we begin when taking on this broader set of skills? I am not as concerned with being able to teach all of the skills,

technologies, genres, and processes that could be useful as I am concerned that I will undermine my own credibility as a teacher if I open Pandora’s box. If I invite my students to create a poster, I feel like I ought to know about effectively using typography (as an example), a skill that I didn’t know much about before this last year. So, I am working on it. And my hope is that we can come up with great assignments AND make sure that we have both the breadth and depth of experience and knowledge to confidently and competently guide our students. So, I have been thinking about how to do this. How do we get teachers trained in literary theory, composition and rhetoric, and creative writing to be more prepared to teach multimodal communication?

My professional goal, over the past year, has been to fill in some of the gaps in knowledge that I have. I have taken classes, looked for tutorials and books, and worked on numerous projects in an attempt to better understand the full implications of a broad definition of writing.

Table: Some of the skills and programs I have been working with over the last year

Code	Programs	Concepts
HTML5, CSS3, JavaScript, PHP, MySQL	Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, Premiere, iMovie, Zotero, Text- editors, CMSes	Web design, photo editing, typography, reference management, databases and database design, information architecture, hardware and servers, hosting services, document management and sharing, permissions and user accounts, file formats, document design, platforms, frameworks, code libraries...

When it is listed like this, it seems like a lot to take on. But when we refocus and examine projects that I have been working on, it becomes less overwhelming. We can't think of professional development as just more work because I know how hard we all work as teachers. The trick is to rethink the work we are already doing. Yes, we need to work on picking up a new skill, but putting the skills to work right away can help us develop the skills and understand the significance of what we are learning much more quickly and effectively.

For example, we all create syllabi. We work on them every semester, and it is an important document for our students. For our benefit and theirs, we can take time to think about document design, image integration, and color to come up with more engaging and usable documents. The schedule I created, for example, uses some information hierarchy in its layout and color to (hopefully) make it easier for students to know what they should be working on and when things are due ([Fig. 1](#)). It is a document we have to create anyway, so we can use the opportunity to learn more about what our word processors can do.

This last year I also put my skills to the test by making an interactive activity for students. I worked with one of my colleagues, and we used collaborative writing tools as we generated ideas. The activity is a website that functions as an interactive story for introducing students to visual analysis assignments ([Fig. 2](#)). As students click through, they are prompted to think through scenarios and visually analyze different posters. As teachers, we often need to come up with new activities and lessons for our classes, and developing activities using a new technology is a great way to serve two goals—make useful and interesting activities and develop our own skills as modern writers.

Additionally, I worked on a site that includes video tutorials for students. The project involved building a very basic site, recording and editing the videos, formatting them for the web, writing transcripts, and more. The site was a collaborative project with another colleague and it forced both of us to learn about video production and web design. Neither of us had prior experience but it seemed like a useful project. These two examples are projects that fit within normal teacher activities—they are activities that are for students to use, and they offered me the challenges that I was looking for.

Another document that we all must produce that could present an opportunity for developing new skills is the CV. While it is a fairly well-established genre and a plain background with sections of text may suffice in most situations, a web CV may also be worth developing. My CV was one of the first documents I tried to develop in HTML, and I cannot say it went well. But as we try to learn new skills ourselves, we must accept that we are learning which means some of our projects will be less than perfect. I don't want to give anyone the impression that everything works out nicely when learning new skills, but finding meaningful ways to practice can give us a more realistic understanding of the learning process our students must go through when learning new technologies and skills, and it can prepare us to more confidently support students as we expand the scope of writing instruction.

Appendix: Images

SCHEDULE

READING THE SCHEDULE:

- Complete the listed work BEFORE class unless otherwise noted.
- Shorthand used on the schedule:
 - *Online*: found on our course site
 - *MNY*: found in our textbook *Money*
 - *EW*: found in our textbook *Everyday Writer*
 - *EA*: found in our textbook *Everything's an Argument*

WEEK 1: JUNE 13-17

- Monday: Introductions
Go over key terms and concepts for the semester.
- Tuesday: READ Introduction in *MNY* pg 1-7
Personal Narrative Essay DUE in class
- Wednesday: READ "Burning Down the House" in *MNY* pg 53-55
- Thursday: READ "Why do Teachers Make so Little" in *MNY* pg 41-43
- Friday: READ "Paying More for Less" pg 119-124

WEEK 2: JUNE 20-24

- Monday: READ Shitty First Drafts *online* AND SKIM "Using Sources" in *EA* pg 436-453
- Tuesday: BRING: *two hard copies of a draft for the Summary Assignment* for in-class workshop
- Wednesday: READ "What if Our Money were Designed to Celebrate Science Instead of Presidents" *online*
Summary Due
- Thursday: READ "An Illustrated History of American Money Design" *online*
- Friday: READ "Mayweather Jr's Hobby" *online*

WEEK 3: JUNE 27-JULY 1

- Monday: READ "Life Lessons from an Ad Man" *online*
- Tuesday: READ "Pathos" in *EA* pg 28-38 AND "Being Poor" in *MNY* pg 89-93
- Wednesday: "Ethos" in *EA* pg 40-48 AND READ "Logos" in *EA* pg 60-70
- Thursday: READ "U.S. Economy Grinds to a Halt" in *MNY* pg 13-15
III CLASS-Visual Rhetorical Analysis

Fig. 1: Sample Syllabus Schedule

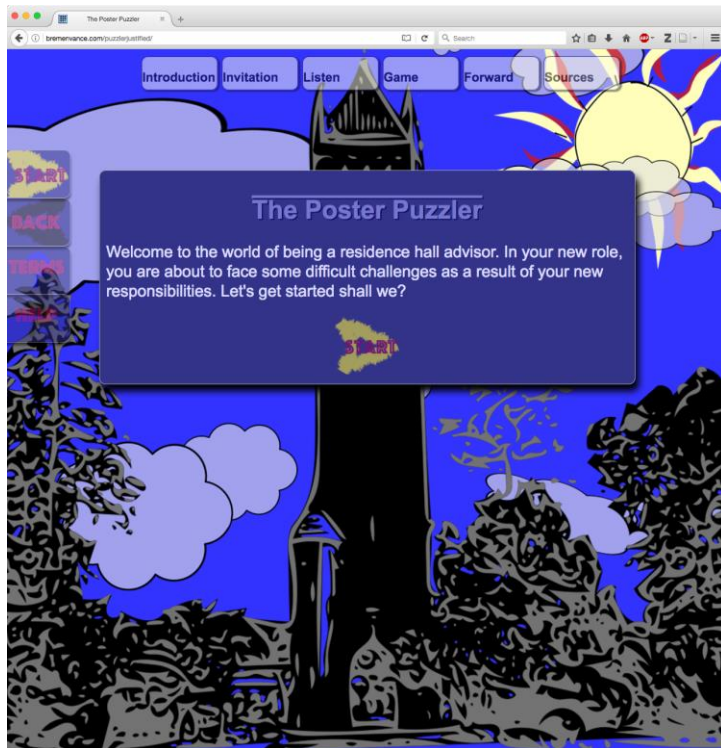


Fig. 2: "The Poster Puzzler" made by Bremen Vance and Lauren Malone

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