

As a composition instructor I strive to cultivate in students an intellectual vigor for critically examining their ideas about themselves and how they are shaped by the cultural texts they encounter every day. In my classes I emphasize the real-world importance of communicating effectively through academic discourse. I also introduce new and alternative textual forms and rhetorical perspectives through which students can examine their assumptions about communication, culture, and “truth.” Communications technologies are evolving, and popular media texts have gained a predominant presence in the lives of students. Students are acquiring much of their knowledge about the world from multimedia and electronic technologies, and I value exploring with students the rhetorical dimensions of these technologies.

I design my courses with the purpose of offering students the opportunity to develop multi-dimensional literacies with which to better navigate the complexities of their lived experiences. I borrow my definition of literacy from Sean Williams, who writes: "To be literate in the twenty-first century means possessing the skills necessary to effectively construct and comfortably navigate multiplicity, to manipulate and critique information, representations, knowledge, and arguments in multiple media from a wide range of sources, and to use multiple expressive technologies including those offered by print, visual, and digital tools" ("Thinking Outside the Pro-Verbal Box" 22). This definition reflects my practice of negotiating with students the myriad discourses and multimedia channels through which we communicate and share knowledge in significant ways. Marshall McLuhan suggests that a powerful way to gain insight into the effects of various media, of which I include print, visual, audio, and web-based, is by creating situations where media collide and release “hybrid energy,” providing us a momentary glance into the structures and discursive effects of each medium. I use the metaphor of “hybrid energy” as a lens through which students and I analyze and produce diverse media texts in conjunction with academic discourse and print texts. By doing so, students gain better insight into how both print and multimedia texts work rhetorically in our culture.

To create opportunities for cultivating multi-dimensional literacies, I develop assignments that encompass both the analysis and production of written academic texts, as well as visual, audio, and multimedia texts. One assignment I developed asked students to explore how our presentations of the self through various media inform our ideas about identity. During the unit, students explored how various writers and artists (including Dorothy Allison, David Sederis, and Cindy Sherman) composed their identities through the production of essays, artwork, photographs and poems. After studying the works of these artists and writers, I asked students to compose themselves in three separate works: a written text, an image, and a spatial text (map or MOO space). I then asked students to write an essay analyzing how each of their compositions communicated a particular conception of themselves. This unit allowed students the opportunity to explore their own multi-faceted identities, and the analysis essay they wrote served as a segue to a larger rhetorical analysis unit that followed.

I use technology to help facilitate my teaching goals in a number of ways, including teaching in a computerized classroom, and developing assignments and class discussion opportunities using the online virtual environment of the MOO (Multi-user domain, Object Oriented). I teach in a computer lab because it offers students the opportunity to analyze and produce web and

technologically-mediated texts like those that have become so much a part of their lives. For example, I taught a unit in which the students in my class and I discussed the nature of the technology we use, its biases, and how the design of such technologies serve the interests of certain groups over others. The assignment I developed for that unit asked students to rhetorically analyze a technology (anything from a software program to the desktop interface to the MOO to Internet search engines to a particular web site to the hardware of the computer itself) by identifying its purpose, intended audience, and specific aspects of the technology that lead them to draw conclusions about the levels at which it appealed or ostracized certain group of people. Students then redesigned the technology they had analyzed, wrote a persuasive essay, and made a presentation attempting to convince the class that their redesign was a more “democratic” one or that appealed to an alternate audience. This assignment allowed students to engage in rhetorical analysis and persuasive discourse. It highlighted how technologies, though often seen as utilitarian and “neutral,” actually serve certain interest groups and cultures. The redesign element of this assignment was critical in showing students that they have the power to change the dominant ideologies invested in the design of various technologies.

Technology can provide exciting ways to better facilitate the goals we have as instructors. However, I believe it is important for teachers who use technology to be able to articulate the reasons behind the choices they have made—including choices about lab use, hardware, software, and assignment requirements—and be able to explain to their students to what end particular technologies are being used in the class. I also find it important to explain how students will be expected to use such technologies in and out of the classroom. Issues of access are important ones to consider, and by making it clear to students why I am having them use certain technologies and create certain texts in the classroom, I can better justify what I am doing and identify the special concerns or needs of particular students.

To be thoughtful about how we use technology in the classroom necessitates that we recognize the complex social factors involved in our relationship with technology. Technology is celebrated for facilitating instruction that appeals to diverse learning, and creating communications network that bring people of diverse locations and cultures into contact with each other. But it can also be seen as a homogenizing tool, as well as something that further increases the gap between those who have access to it and those who do not. These concerns are ones we need to be aware of and address in our classes. But this concern and others should not be a reason to ignore technology altogether. The incredible possibilities that have arisen as a result of technological advancement require us to explore the ways computers affect communication and our cultural consciousness.