

8 Beyond Text and Talk: A Multimodal Approach to First- Year Composition

Jody Shipka

Although an essay might be referred to as a composition, that terminology confused no one. Musicians composed; what we were doing was writing.

—Lee Odell & Christina Lynn Prell

In the traditional freshman English program the term papers written by the students deal with subjects ranging from avitaminosis to Zionism. The fact seems to be an admission that the course lacks a distinguishing content of its own. In history one writes on history; in economics, one writes on economics; in English—or so we now believe—one ought to write on some problem concerning the use of language. This is an idea that gives unified content to the course.

—Harold E. Briggs

I begin with two epigraphs, each pointing to an important dimension of the first-year composition (FYC) courses I have taught for the past twelve years. While assignments, activities, and the particular texts I assign have changed and will (I assume) continue to change as scholarship, technologies, and students' and my interests continue to also change, what has remained a consistent, non-negotiable aspect of the course are these twinned beliefs: That those teaching first-year com-

position should be teaching composition, and that the proper subject matter for composition courses is composition.

In a publication that calls for research on “composing, not just writing—composing” (295), Lee Odell and Christina Lynn Prell point out how the terms “composing” and “writing” are too often, and erroneously, equated. The authors call for a more “comprehensive view of composing” (296), one that attends not just to alphabetic text, but to the “interanimation of words, visual images, and page (or screen) design” (295). To my mind, taking a broader view of and approach to, composing is not just a matter of practicing what many of us profess to teach, theorize, or research. Rather, given the increased materials with which, contexts in which, and purposes for which, students currently make and negotiate meaning, it has become increasingly important that our courses continue to “disturb the marriage between comfortable writing that forms our disciplinary core and the entire range of new media for writing” (Faigely and Romano 49). Like others have argued, I argue here that our courses need to do more to bridge the gap between the texts and practices typically associated with the composition (or writing) classroom and the various other texts and practices students experience beyond the space of the classroom (see also Johnson-Eilola; Millard; Selfe; and Yancey). To ensure that our courses do not become irrelevant—or, depending on one’s perspective, to ensure that they do not become *increasingly irrelevant*—we must ask students to examine the design of words on a page as well as the relationships among words, images, codes, textures, sounds, colors, and potentials for movement. We need, in short, to embrace composition. More specifically still, and in keeping with those who advocated a communications approach to the Freshman English course more than a half century ago, we need to create courses and build curricula designed with a mind toward the communicative world(s) that our students “are living in now and will be citizens of in the future” (Dunn 283). The kind of courses I have in mind would

- be grounded in social scientific theories of discourse, underscoring for students both the social and personal dimensions of communicative practice (Dunn);
- focus on the various mediums of communication students encounter (Briggs);

- treat the communicative process as a “dynamic whole,” highlighting for students how language and other media are “used by all kinds of people in all kinds of ways” (Dean 81-83);
- require that students attend not simply to what a text says or means, but to what that text *does*—to attend to questions related to how, when, and/or how well that text accomplishes meaning (Briggs);
- encourage a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among words, minds, and things, and acknowledge the roles that bodies, gestures, and environments play in communication practices (Dunn); and
- facilitate greater meta-communicative awareness by asking students to reflect on and assume responsibility for what “one says and writes” (Briggs 328).

In addition to expressing concern that the first-year course was not designed to respond to the current or projected needs of its students, proponents of the communications approach found equally problematic the lack of unified course content. This was a problem Albert Kitzhaber also noted, years later, in his 1963 publication *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*. There, Kitzhaber reported that he had found “a bewildering variety of content” being offered across sections of the first-year course (10). As Harold Briggs argued in *College English* in 1948, when compared with courses in history or economics (to this list we might add many other courses students are often required to take; e.g., psychology, biology, math, etc.), where students are both expected and expecting to learn and to write about history or economics, the “traditional English course” seemed, by contrast, to offer a “hash of strange ingredients” (331). As Briggs writes: “One day one studies punctuation, the next day paragraphing, the next day an essay on the atomic bomb, and the next, an essay on jargon, or frying fish cakes” (331). Proponents of a communications approach proposed instead that the first-year course be “a course in communication *about* communication—that is, a course in communication skills with integrated subject matter” (Malmstrom 23, emphasis added). Instead of looking elsewhere for content, the course would be dedicated to examining the nature of communication: “the elements of which it is composed, the instruments which it used, the processes by which it comes about [and] the obstacles to its achievement” (23). The classroom itself would be fashioned as a “laboratory”

of sorts, and in these spaces, students “would learn to exchange ideas and experiences by participating in many reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities” (23).

In keeping with much of what proponents of a communications approach to the first-year course were advocating half a century ago—or, to put a more contemporary spin on things—in keeping with Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s seminal 2007 publication, “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)envisioning ‘First Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies,’” I too strongly believe that we need to design courses that introduce students to course-appropriate content and that challenge the idea that writing is “a basic universal skill” (Downs and Wardle 553). Further, like Downs and Wardle, I suggest that when we look elsewhere, or when we allow those teaching the course to look elsewhere for course content,

we silently support the misconceptions that writing is not a real subject, that writing courses do not require expert instructors, and that rhetoric and composition are not genuine research areas or legitimate intellectual pursuits. We are, thus, complicit in reinforcing outsiders’ views of writing studies as a trivial, skill-teaching nondiscipline. (553)

A crucial difference between the approach to FYC theorized and described by Downs and Wardle and what I offer here has to do with how the chief aims and objectives of the course point to slightly different, but still, I suggest, overlapping content. Downs and Wardle describe a course that is “topically oriented to reading and writing as scholarly inquiry” and that encourages “more realistic understandings of writing” by having students read and respond to scholarly texts that focus on writing/written discourse (553). The approach I offer has students reading and responding to scholarship that includes, but is not limited to, the consideration of written discourse. More specifically, the content of my course has students reading, thinking, and learning about composition as a course, object, and multimodal communicative practice.

**COMPOSED WITH WORDS, IMAGES, GENRES,
SPACES, FEELINGS, MEMORIES, HANDS, FEET,
AND OTHER PEOPLE: ARTICULATING A TOOL KIT
APPROACH TO FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION**

Given the emphasis my course places on tracing the social and personal dimensions of composing processes, treating that process as a “dynamic whole” (Dean 81), and attending to the various genres and media students routinely encounter, it has proven helpful to ground the course in sociohistoric theory. I have found particular value in adapting for the FYC course what James Wertsch has termed a “tool kit approach” to mediated action (94). Rather than attempting to isolate and individually treat the various tools and support one employs while carrying out a particular action, a “tool kit approach” focuses on the complex mix of tools—or, as they are often referred to by Wertsch, *mediational means*—to which people have access. Importantly, the approach requires that we pay close attention to the “patterns of choice [individuals] manifest in selecting a particular means for a particular occasion” (94), and to consider why a particular mix of mediational means (as opposed to any number of others we might imagine having been employed instead) were used while carrying out a particular action or process. This is a phenomenon Wertsch calls *privileging*. Before providing a brief illustration of what a tool kit approach to the FYC course looks like, I clarify what Wertsch means by *mediational means*.

In keeping with the work of Lev Vygotsky, Wertsch’s definition of mediational means includes, but is not limited to, what Vygotsky termed “psychological tools”—language, various systems for counting, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, diagrams, maps, mechanical drawings, etc. Maintaining that Vygotsky’s work ultimately left underexplored a much wider range of tools and support available to individuals and groups, Wertsch’s work expands the category of tools in ways that allow us to consider as well the role played by other kinds of material support, such as hammers, nails, computers, poles, keyboards, pencils, books, and so on.

By way of brief example, a tool kit approach to composing asks students to consider the array of tools, supports, or mediational means they use throughout the process of completing a particular task or objective; say, for instance, while completing a linear, argumentative, research-based essay for a FYC class. The list of supports a particular

student draws on throughout the process of completing the task might include, among other things: the instructor's assignment sheet; conferences or informal meetings with the instructor to discuss the task; in-class workshops; conversations with classmates; trips to the library; various books or web sources consulted; knowledge of and adherence to certain writerly expectations (i.e., the use of genres and/or conventions appropriate to the task at hand); the use of the English language; 8 ½ x 11" paper; ink; notes written by hand; time spent entering text into a computer; the experience of having completed a similar kind of task in another context (e.g., for another class, in high school), and so on. If we look to still other supports employed throughout the process—those that do not, on first consideration, seem directly related to the task at hand—the list of supports involved in the production of a single text grows considerably longer: For instance, listening to music or having the television on while one revises their work, preferring to work in specific spaces with one's body positioned in particular ways, taking a break to go running to clear one's head, going to the store to get more paper, asking a family member to proofread a draft, drinking coffee to stay awake during an all-nighter, and so on. From a tool kit perspective, it becomes increasingly apparent just how densely populated, complexly layered, and highly distributed an otherwise seemingly simple and straight-forward task or process can be.

Before attempting to more concretely document how Wertsch's tool kit approach to mediated action informs my approach to the FYC course, I highlight briefly what I consider to be two salient benefits of adopting a tool kit approach. First, asking students to think about the various tools and supports (both human and non-human) that comprise their metaphorical tool kits helps to both populate and externalize something that often feels incredibly individual and internal. Based on conversations I've had with students (and based on much of my own lived experience as a writer/composer), it strikes me that writing—or, more broadly stated, composing—texts seems, indeed, *feels*, like something one does all on one's own. Often the sense is that when something actually happens—when one gets an idea, thinks of something to say, or begins composing a text—those things come from, or happen, inside. It may seem as though the idea or text had suddenly and magically sprung, more or less fully-formed, from the individual's head, heart, or gut. In this way, or so the reasoning goes, one either knows how to write well or one does not; one is a good writer or one

is not. Perhaps he or she simply happens to lack that particular skill, knack, gene, or body part. Wertsch refers to this as the “metaphor of possession”—the idea that an individual either has or does not have a specific ability or skill set, and that the outcome of an assessment in one context necessarily predicts assessment in another, or worse yet, in all other contexts. As Wertsch reminds us, as long as the metaphor of possession shapes our understandings, “a basic issue—the different uses or functions of a tool—escapes [our] attention” (94-95). By directing students’ attention to the various purposes, uses, and contexts for their work, and by highlighting the array of mediational means they select (or reject) while making and negotiating meaning, a tool kit approach helps combat the idea that the ability to create successful or meaningful texts is simply something one “has” or “possesses.” A tool kit approach does this by redirecting our attention to the complexity, contingency, and distributed aspects of composing practices.

In addition to helping populate and externalize something that often feels incredibly individual and internal, the tool kit metaphor also underscores for students that compositions are built, constructed, or crafted things, and thereby help in countering the idea that they somehow magically or suddenly happen for the lucky few. In “Design and Transformation: New Theories of Meaning,” Gunther Kress argues that “in the context of multimodal, multimedia modes of textual production in the era of electronic technologies, the task of text-makers is that of *complex orchestration*” (160, emphasis mine). While I quite like the analogy Kress uses here, particularly for the way it directs our attention to modes other than linear/alphabetic, what a tool kit approach affords is the idea of text-making (or composing) as complex, multimodal engineering. While Kress focuses primarily on electronic technologies, the approach to FYC that I offer, as the brief illustration above suggests, considers both new and not-so-new technologies while examining the role that humans and non-humans play in the composing process. To ensure that students closely attend to the built, constructed, crafted, and material dimensions of compositions and composing practices, they are asked to respond to the following questions while creating their own compositions and while responding to those created by others:

- What is it?
- What is it comprised of?
- What work does (or might) it do?

The first question—“What is it?”—requires students to consider conventions of naming or categorizing. How do we know what to call or how to refer to a particular text or process? Is the text a poem, a set of song lyrics, a Web page, an advertisement, an introduction, a scholarly essay, an essay geared to a more general/popular audience, a works cited page, a performance, a photograph, a painting? Here, I urge students to be as specific as possible. If the text is a poem, what kind of poem is it specifically? Is it a sonnet, a haiku, a ballad, blank verse? The second question—“What is it comprised of?”—is intended to not only help students flesh out or justify their response to the first question, but to also closely attend to the specific things a particular text is comprised of—to itemize or catalog, if you will. I caution students that what I look for here is not deep or complex interpretation so much as a listing of the elements that the text-maker used while creating the text—words, sentences, paragraphs, a title, an epigraph, italics, colors, still or moving images, etc. The final question—“What work does it do?”—asks students to consider how the text and its component parts function. What is the text attempting to do for, to, or with its audience? Does it instruct, persuade, emphasize, inform, entertain, caution, acknowledge, move a person into action or feel a specific emotion? Clearly, texts often attempt more than one of these rhetorical objectives, so students are warned to anticipate diversity and much overlap while identifying the work a particular text does.

Although the three questions are listed here in a particular order, they might be approached in any order. Often, in fact, identifying what texts are comprised of helps shed light on the work they do and how, specifically, they are identified and categorized. While I have more to say about the role these three core questions play throughout the semester, I reiterate here that the second question—“What is the text comprised of?”—can prove especially challenging for students, as they tend to imagine that what I’m asking them to identify is far more complex than it is. I have found it immensely helpful to have students work through this question in class, using a common text (usually the first assigned reading of the semester) as the focal text. Placing students in pairs, I ask them to jot down everything they see going on in, on, or around the pages of the reading, beginning with the size, color, and type of paper the text is printed on. I recommend that they work from the top-down, listing everything they can identify with regard to the text’s appearance and construction. Nothing, I remind them,

is too obvious to note, including the title, the author's name, an epigraph, x-number of paragraphs, use of English language, italics, quotes from other sources, images, captions, hand-written annotations in the margins of the text, works cited, and so on. Taken to an extreme, students could list the number of sentences, words, letters, or marks of punctuation comprising a text, but there is rarely time for, or frankly, the desire to do that. The point of the activity is to get students accustomed to tracking the various items from which, or with which, a text has been composed. Importantly, in asking them to think about texts created by others in this way, the activity invites them to think more about the various ingredients—the specific tools and moves, if you will—that comprise the texts that they create.

ON READING(S)

Like those who insist that the FYC course has a content of its own—whether this means drawing from communication or writing studies scholarship—I choose course materials that include, but are not limited to, the consideration of writing and written discourse. While the specific texts I assign have and continue to change, the content I choose is, for the most part, geared toward having students thinking, learning, reading, and composing about composition as a course, object, and multimodal practice. It is a course in composing about composition. As such, and with a mind toward Odell and Prell's call for a more “comprehensive view of composing” (296), the course materials, combined with in-class activities and discussions, are geared toward facilitating a greater awareness of how writing functions as but one “stream within the broader flows of semiotic activity” (Prior 11; see also Lemke; Medway; and Witte).

When it comes to choosing particular texts for students to engage with in the course, I draw primarily from four areas of scholarship: (1) texts that focus on the FYC course itself (its history, aims, objectives, and development); (2) texts that focus primarily on writing and the production of written texts; (3) texts that concentrate on multimodality, multiple literacies, changing technologies, and newer forms of media; and (4) a category I've termed “other.” (See “Partial List of Suggested Readings” in the appendix for examples of texts I've used in the course.) Before illustrating how in-class activities and discussions are geared toward providing students ways of engaging more deeply

with texts that are often challenging for them, I'll say a bit about why I include readings from each of the four categories.

I began sharing with students readings about the history, objectives, and development of the FYC course when students began expressing surprise that the course actually has a history or that people (like myself) actually chose to spend time researching, theorizing, and publishing scholarship about it. The readings also proved useful because students often relate to them. Many of the texts are, after all, supposedly about them: who they are, what they know, and what they are supposed to learn, do, and/or experience as a result of taking the course. Because my approach to the course tends not to be what the majority of students expect (many expect, for instance, a course that has them reading popular, controversial, or “hot” topics and writing variations on five-paragraph themes that many students practiced in high school), the readings have helped illuminate for students how my approach to the course relates to, and diverges from, what other scholars and practitioners have identified as the salient goals, objectives, and outcomes of the course. In part, I include a good number of texts that deal with writing and written processes because it is what students (and others) expect to see being read, discussed, and written about in an FYC course. Return once again to Odell and Prell's words: “Although an essay might be referred to as a composition, that terminology confused no one. Musicians composed; what we were doing was writing” (296). Choosing to include this scholarship is not simply about aligning with student or institutional expectations. Rather, if I want students to attend to writing in relation to the other supports and semiotic systems they draw upon while making and negotiating meaning, scholarship that deals with writing and the process of composing written texts strikes me as a necessary component of the course. The choice to include readings that focus on multimodality, multiliteracies, and the changing technologies of communicative practice is a way to extend, enrich, and complicate the readings that deal with written texts and processes. For instance, after reading selections from Margaret Finders' *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*, students are asked to consider how such a study might be impacted or updated by considering still other kinds of (multi)literate practices, such as blogging, Facebooking, texting, and Youtubing. Finally, cognizant that the bulk of the texts I assign for class are print-based, I include the category of “other” for those texts, objects, and performances

that cannot be neatly bound in course packs or shelved at the bookstore. Included here are videos I have created, ones that have proven useful to further illustrate or problematize issues that come up in assigned, print-based texts. For instance, “Gonna Make You Sweat” deals with the affective dimensions of composing processes and documents one woman’s process of making a dance-based composition. “Other People’s Lives” and “Tripping the Decades” are both mash-ups. “Tripping” relates nicely to the FYC readings, as it deals with the history of the discipline and the course, but both videos facilitate conversations about creating arguments with video and problematize notions of individual authorship. Also included in this category are various sample texts composed by former students that I share with students throughout the semester, as well as the various texts students bring to class. In fact, the bulk of the texts comprising the category of “other” are usually suggested, found, or brought in by students. For instance, after reading a chapter from David Levy’s *Scrolling Forward*, entitled “A Mediation on a Receipt,” students are asked to bring to class a found or authorless text; this might be a coffee cup, receipt, sticker, grocery list, advertisement, or candy wrapper. With our core questions and Levy’s treatment of the receipt in mind, students share with each other their found texts, discussing what each one is, what it’s comprised of, how it’s used, valued, circulated, and responded to. Having said a bit about how content for the course is selected, I offer another example of an activity, one I refer to as “The Textual Olympics,” designed to provide students with ways of engaging with assigned readings. I indicated earlier that such activities can be extremely helpful unpacking readings that students find difficult, unfamiliar, or theoretically dense.

Though I often change the readings for the course, I tend always to include, and in fact, begin the semester with the same two readings: A piece by Lex Runciman titled “Fun?” and Andrea Fishman’s study of writing in the Amish community, “Because This Is Who We Are: Writing in the Amish Community.” Runciman’s piece is a wonderful way to introduce students to FYC scholarship and to get them thinking about the affective dimensions of writing and writing processes. Fishman’s piece, though it can prove difficult for students not accustomed to reading ethnographic studies, is highly effective in getting students to think about issues surrounding writing and identity as well as how their uses for, and attitudes toward, writing compare with those of the Amish community that Fishman studies. During the class session be-

fore these readings are assigned, I ask students to begin comprising a list of all the kinds of texts they know how to produce. They do this as homework, understanding that their list will be discussed in the next class. I am careful to underscore that in using the word “text,” I am imagining a broader definition than they may be accustomed to. By “text,” I mean something that is purposefully (though not always successfully) engineered in ways that convey meaning to a particular audience. Thus, while some of the texts on their lists may be comprised chiefly of words and sentences, including poems, scholarly essays, the minutes for a meeting, memos, a tweet, a type-written letter, a Facebook status update—others may not be. Some of the texts appearing on their lists might have no alphabetic text associated with them at all, including a painting, a photograph, a well-designed room, or a special meal. Still other texts might feature a mix of alphabetic text, spoken words, images, gestures, and color, including a greeting card, a Web page, a spoken poem, a blog entry, or a monologue. I ask students to be as specific as they can with their lists. Rather than simply listing “poetry” or “research paper,” I ask them to think about all the different kinds of poems or research papers they have composed; for example, a research paper for a history class, an English class, a philosophy class, and so on. While composing their lists, students are asked to reflect on how, where, when, and from whom they learned to compose specific types of texts. Did they learn to compose them in school, from parents, from a book or a movie, by watching someone else, or on their own, perhaps by trial and error? I also ask students to consider what makes someone good, proficient, or even an expert at producing the various texts on their lists. Related to this, I ask them to rate themselves and their ability to produce the various texts on their list—hence the “Olympic” part of the activity’s title. Students come to class with their lists and having read pieces from Runciman and Fishman. In addition to providing students with a way of comparing how the kinds of texts they produce compare with those produced by the Amish community Fishman studies, the lists allow us to examine how students’ uses of, and attitudes toward, the production of texts compare with those of the Amish. With a mind toward Runciman’s piece, we consider the affective dimensions of textual production: Which listed items (if any) are fun to compose, and why? Which seem more like punishment, and why? As there is rarely enough time in a single class session to discuss every text on their lists—again, to identify what those texts are, what

they are composed of, and what work they do—I ask students to hold onto their lists so we can revisit them in the context of other readings, during other class sessions. I encourage students to continue adding texts to their lists as the semester progresses, as they often prove useful when students receive their major project assignments.

ON TASKS AND ACTIVITIES

Throughout the semester, students complete four different kinds of tasks. In addition to completing two major projects, they must participate in a group presentation, compose summary-synthesis reports for assigned readings, and create posts for Blackboard-based discussions. In keeping with Wertsch’s tool kit approach to mediated action, each of these tasks has been designed in ways that require students to think both purposefully and flexibly about their work while also attending closely to the various choices they make while completing these tasks. Students are also required to consider how and why a particular mix of mediational means—as opposed to others they might have imagined employing—was ultimately decided upon while completing a task. Here I offer a brief description of each task type.

Summary-Synthesis Reports. These tri-part, one page, single-spaced reports are due at the start of class sessions when readings have been assigned. Devised as a way to ensure that students are keeping up with the readings and to facilitate class discussion, the summary-synthesis reports serve an additional function by providing me with a better sense of how students are engaging with readings, how they are connecting issues raised in current readings with previous readings, and help to address the kinds of questions students have about the readings. Here, proportion is everything. Students are asked to briefly (in two or three sentences) summarize a point raised in one of the readings. In the synthesis section, they are to make connections between current and previous readings. The synthesis portion should comprise the bulk of report—at least three-quarters. Finally, in the question section of the report, students offer two or three questions about the readings or points raised in the report. I try to steer students away from definitional questions (e.g., “What does Lemke mean by selective contextualization?”) and toward questions that work to extend or complicate the readings (e.g., “Finders’ study is pretty dated. What might that study

look like if it were replicated now? What might it have looked like then had it focused on boys?”).

Students bring two copies of their report to class. One is handed in to me, and the other is circulated amongst other members of the class. After spending time reading the reports, the class discusses the readings and questions that are raised at the end of the students' reports. What I like about this task is that having students read one another's reports helps combat the idea that writing and reading activities have one correct answer. It does this by concretely illustrating that different points will be raised, connections made, and questions asked by different people with different interests and investments.

Major Projects. I've described in great detail elsewhere some of the projects assigned to students (see especially *Toward a Composition Made Whole*). Here, I attempt to talk about how, generally speaking, the major project assignments are engineered. In contrast to assignments that allow students to choose their own topic—with the expectation that their final products will all look similar to one another and be experienced in similar ways (i.e., a video, a Web page, or an argumentative, research-based essay)—my tasks routinely specify for students something about the content of their work and leave decisions about the final form of and context for that work up to the students. In this way, when final products are due, they take many different forms. I might receive the URL for a Web page, an essay, a video, or a magazine.

This is not to say that students are free to do what they want, how they want. Each task comes with certain non-negotiable elements. For instance, with a task called “Texts in Contexts,” students examine the way a person, place, thing, or belief system (stereotypes work extremely well for this task) is represented in at least six different types of texts. In so doing, a student might choose to examine a film, a scholarly essay, a greeting card, a television show, a bumper sticker, a piece of fiction, a song, and so on. While students are free to choose their subject matter, no two of their source texts are allowed to be of the same type. Students cannot examine, for instance, how the idea of Santa as fat and jolly is represented in six different films. The task is designed to have students closely attend to how the various text sources capitalize on the media, modes, and moves of which they are comprised in order to perpetuate a certain belief or stereotype. Students must also produce 200-word (minimum) analyses for each of their sources. It is up to students, then, to determine an audience for their work, including

the specific context in which it will be encountered and experienced, the rhetorical work their project will do, and the form the finished work will take. The major projects are, indeed, daunting. Students often claim that they have no idea of what to do or where to start. In this way, I have found it helpful to share with students examples of what former students have done and to refer students back to the list of texts they generated for the “Textual Olympics” activity.

Equally helpful are the two in-class workshop sessions held one week after a project task is assigned. Unlike workshops in which students pair up and trade drafts of their work, the workshop sessions are always run as large group, whole-class workshops. Rather than asking students to bring full or rough drafts of their work to the sessions, they are required to compose “project notes”—a single-spaced page or two of ideas detailing how they are currently thinking about approaching the task. With the task referenced above, for instance, a student’s project notes mention the subject matter or stereotype he or she plans to work with and list the various ideas he or she has come up with for contextualizing and presenting the source analyses for an audience of his or her choosing. Importantly, for each project assigned, students must come up with at least two or three ways of approaching the task. Thus, project notes also treat the various ways students have begun thinking about approaching the task. During workshop sessions, students take turns talking about their ideas and soliciting feedback from their peers. I cannot emphasize enough how incredibly valuable these sessions have proven to be. In addition to illustrating for each other the various ways they go about approaching the task, students often report leaving these sessions with a much better sense of what they will do for the project and how they will go about accomplishing it.

Holding these workshop sessions early—one week after a task is assigned—is incredibly beneficial. Not only are students more willing to consider and work with feedback offered by myself and their peers, but asking students to bring in project notes (as opposed to full drafts) allows them to take more risks, to be more flexible in considering the various ways they might approach a task. To my mind, the best workshop sessions are the ones that end with students changing their approach because, as many have reported over the years, the questions and advice offered during the sessions help them come up with better ideas and/or ones they were much more passionate about pursuing.

Blackboard Responses. Assigned after the second in-class workshop ses-

sion described above, these mandatory postings require students to continue fleshing out and developing their plans for major projects, solicit advice from classmates, and/or provide input or advice on the evolving projects plans of their classmates. Like the in-class workshop sessions, the Blackboard postings underscore for students that there are many ways of approaching and accomplishing the major projects. I believe strongly that students who are able to see (or, in the case of the workshop sessions, hear about) the ideas, tools, techniques, and strategies their classmates employ while working on major projects benefit tremendously, both in terms of understanding that there is more than one way to accomplish a task and in thinking about how the adoption of similar tools, techniques, or strategies might potentially impact their own work.

Group Presentations. Students are placed into groups of four and assigned the readings and class session for which they will be responsible. As the task sheet makes clear, the group’s job is not to summarize the readings for the class; rather, the group’s main objective is to find ways of extending, enriching, or even complicating issues raised in assigned texts, usually by way of an in-class activity. This may sound like a daunting task, but, in addition to selecting readings for the presentation dates that are particularly presentation-friendly, I share with students examples of what former students have done with the same or similar readings. Additionally, and long before the first group is scheduled to present, I model the task for students through activities and in-class discussions conducted earlier in the semester. All group members are required to meet with me at least a week prior to their presentation date. During this meeting, after students have already met on their own to discuss the readings and their plans for the session, the group shares their ideas with me. They articulate what, specifically, they hope to accomplish during the session, detail the various ways they have imagined achieving those ends, and generally address how their plans relate to the readings. One week after they present, each group member is required to submit a highly detailed reflection about the experience—something I discuss in more detail below—called a “Statement of Goals and Choices” (SOGC).

RECONFIGURING THE DYNAMICS OF RESPONSE AND ASSESSMENT

In addition to providing students with a more comprehensive approach to composing—one that includes, but is not limited to, examining

how talk and how written text impacts composing practices—the course works to facilitate greater meta-communicative awareness. It does this by requiring students to assume responsibility for what they say or write, but also for what they build: for the texts and contexts they engineer throughout the semester. To ensure that students think carefully about the choices they make, they are required to compose highly detailed statements for much of the work they produce during the semester. Designed to provide students with still more experience addressing the core questions associated with the course (i.e., “What is it?”; “What is it comprised of?”; and “What work does it do?”), the Statements of Goals and Choices (SOGCs) require that students provide a list of all the rhetorical, methodological, and material choices they made with their work. Following this, they are asked to explain why they made those choices and to reflect on (or anticipate) how those choices might impact the reception and subsequent evaluation of that work. To ensure that students are putting into the statement the maximum amount of thought and effort, they are worth half the total grade earned for a task.

While the questions students respond to may differ slightly depending on the task, they are always asked to respond to the following questions:

1. What, specifically, is this piece trying to accomplish? What work does, or might, this piece do? For whom? In what contexts?
2. What specific rhetorical, material, methodological, and technological choices did you make in the service of accomplishing the goal(s) articulated above? Catalog, as well, the choices that you might not have consciously made—those that were made for you when you opted to work with certain genres, materials, and technologies.
3. Why did you end up pursuing this plan, as opposed to the others you came up with? How did the various choices listed above allow you to accomplish things that other sets or combinations of choices would not have?

At the end of each statement, students are asked to list all the supports or mediational means (both human and non-human) that played a role in helping them accomplish the task. Similar to the scrolling credits featured at the end of movies, these lists remind students of the individual and social aspects of composing processes, further underscoring just how densely populated, complexly layered, and highly distributed those processes can be.

I see at least two primary benefits associated with requiring students to compose these statements. Firstly, given that students often choose to work with genres, materials, and technologies I am not familiar with, the statements provide me with ways of navigating, responding to, and assessing such texts. In requiring students to discuss why they selected “a particular means for a particular occasion,” thereby highlighting their “patterns of choice” (Wertsch 94), the statements also provide me with a better understanding of how the mix of mediational means students employ in their work simultaneously provide shape for, and take shape from, the tasks they encounter in the course. Secondly, as these “precisely defined goal statements” make students increasingly cognizant of how texts are comprised of a series of choices or “moves” that, taken together, afford certain potentials for engaging with those texts (Beach 137-38), students are better prepared to consider if, how, when, why, and for whom their texts might fail to achieve their primary objectives. Instead then of relying on instructors to “tell them what their problems are and how to remedy those problems” (Beach 127), students become more sophisticated and flexible rhetoricians, and are able to describe and share with others the potentials and limitations of their work. This ability to rigorously reflect on their own work—to articulate what they are attempting to do and why—I believe, serves students well, whether in other classes, in the workplace, and/or in other areas of their lives.

The workshop sessions and SOGCs, in particular, serve the purpose of reconfiguring the dynamics and directions of responding to and assessing student work. This is not to say that students are assigning grades to themselves or to each other. In the end, I respond to and assign a final grade for their work. What it does mean, and what I take to be one of the chief benefits of this approach, is that throughout much of the semester—particularly as they begin generating ideas and working through their approaches to tasks and activities—students are not depending on me (i.e., as the class’ sole authority) to tell them if something is working well, whether they should pursue other courses of action, or what they should change or revise. While I certainly raise questions and offer input about their work, students also look to one another for ideas, feedback, and suggestions. What’s more, they are learning to think even more carefully, critically, and flexibly about the goals they set and the choices they make with their own work.

In her 2004 publication, *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Spaces and Encountering Difference*, Nedra Reynolds calls for the development of writing studies that foreground “the sense of place and space that readers and writers bring with them to the intellectual work of writing, to navigating, remembering and *composing*” (176, emphasis mine). In doing so, Reynolds challenges us to develop frameworks that attend to the affective, embodied, and material dimensions of writing—ones that highlight how texts are carved “out of time and space in particular circumstances that differ for each writer” (3-4). What I have offered here is an approach to the FYC course that affords this by providing students with opportunities to examine writing in relation to other supports or mediational means that they routinely employ in their work. It provides them with an opportunity to learn more about composition—as a course, an object, and a multimodal phenomenon. The approach highlights for students the richness and complexity of composition(s) and composing processes, and also prepares them to speak to matters concerning what texts are, what they are comprised of, and the kinds of rhetorical and material work they do.

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Appendix: Course Syllabus

ENGLISH 100: FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

This course is designed to introduce students to techniques that will enable them to engage with a wide range of social texts (including but not limited to those traditionally referred to as “academic”) in increasingly active, flexible, responsible, and purposeful ways. In keeping with the course title, we will be examining composition—as a course, object and communicative practice. In so doing, we will explore the complex relationship between speech, writing and other of the rich communicative resources we routinely employ while creating and responding to various types of texts.

Some of the questions the course will explore include:

- In addition to speech and lettered text, what are some of the meaning-making resources upon which we routinely draw while composing texts?
- How do images, movements, gestures, objects, colors, sound schemes, scents, etc. impact our interactions with (and our understanding of the potentials of) talk and text?
- How do we determine which communicative resources are the most appropriate for the task to hand?
- How do we acquire, learn to value, learn *when* and *how* to use these resources appropriately?
- What role does context play in helping us make and negotiate meaning?
- How are new media applications (and the increasing speed at which data can now be transmitted from one machine to another) impacting our curricular and extracurricular routines? For instance, how might time spent on *Facebook*, or time spent creating webpages, blogs, emails, and text messages impact how we write, when we write, where we write, how frequently we write, and what we even think of as writing?
- If print is, in fact, “being pushed off the page” (as Gunther Kress and others have maintained), how might this impact what we do, what we learn to value, and/or how we are assessed in school? In other words, if the experience of reading a web page demands that one negotiates typewritten characters on the page as well as images, sounds, color, design/layout

principles, and movement (or at least potentials for movement) on the page, how does this impact what we need to know, consider or do while interacting with multimodal texts?

Course Percentages

Participation: 10%*

Weekly Responses (summary-synthesis reports or Blackboard postings): 30%

Project #1: 20%

Project #2: 30%

Group Presentation: 10%

* A note on participation: I expect that each of you will be here **on time**, and prepared to engage with the course readings, workshops, or other activities we have scheduled. To earn a passing (C-level) mark for participation, you need to do more than prep for class and show up for each class session. This course has been purposely designed to afford you all the opportunity to exchange ideas, to discuss the readings, and your own work as it progresses. I expect each of you to be here, ready to share your ideas on the course materials with others. Anyone arriving unprepared for the class session will be marked as absent. Anyone checking email, text-messaging, etc. in class will be marked as absent.

See the “Partial List of Suggested Readings” below for a sampling of some of the texts, or portions of texts, I’ve used over the years.

Partial List of Suggested Readings

(arranged by topic/theme)

On the FYC course—History, Approaches, Assignments, Expectations

Bridwell-Bowles, Lillian. “Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy.” *CCC* 43, 1992.

Carroll, Lee Ann. “Pomo Blues: Stories from First-Year Composition.” *CE* 59:8, 1997.

Cline, Andrew R. “Reconsidering the Textbook in the First-Year Composition Class” in *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing*. Tina LaVonne Good & Leanne B. Warshauer, eds. Longman, 2000.

Connors, Robert. “Personal Writing Assignments.” *CCC* 38:2, 1987.

- Council of Writing Program Administrators. "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition." *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource*. Eds. Stuart C. Brown and Theresa Enos. NJ: Erlbaum, 2002. 519–22.
- Crowley, Sharon. "Correct English . . . Entrance Exam" (1870) in *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.
- Deemer, Charles. "English Composition as a Happening." *CE* 29:2, 1967.
- Lambert, Robert. "Freshman Masks." *CCC* 13:4, 1962.
- Larson, Richard L. "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing." *College English*, 44:8, 1982.
- Lutz, William D. "Making Freshman English a Happening." *CCC* 22:1, 1971.
- Paull, Michael and Jack Kligerman. "Invention, Composition and the Urban College." *CE* 33, 1972.
- Stout, George D. "A Why and How for Freshman Composition." *CCC* 4:1, 1953.
- Plus select 1950 CCC workshop reports (i.e., "Function of Comp Course," "Objectives," "Reading/Grading Themes")

On Writing/Writing Studies

- Bazerman, Charles & Paul Prior, eds. *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*. Routledge, 2003.
- Bawarshi, Anis. *Genre And The Invention Of The Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*. Utah State University Press, 2003.
- Brooke, Robert. "Underlife and Writing Instruction." *CCC* 38:2, 1987.
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- Corno, Lyn. "What It Means to Be Literate about Classrooms" in *Classrooms and Literacy*. David Bloome, ed. 1989.

- Finders, Margaret. *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*. Teachers College Press, 1997.
- Fishman, Andrea. "Because This Is Who We Are: Writing in the Amish Community" in David Barton & Roz Ivanic, eds. *Writing in the Community*. Sage, 1991.
- Miller, Susan, ed. *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*. W. W. Norton, 2009.
- Nelson, Jennie. "Reading Classrooms as Text: Exploring Student Writers' Interpretive Practices." *CCC* 46, 1995.
- Runciman, Lex. "Fun?" *CE* Vol. 53, No. 2, Feb., 1991
- Wardle, Elizabeth & Douglas Downs. *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010.

On Multimodality/Multiliteracies/New Media

- Baron, Dennis. "From Pencils to Pixels . . ." in *Passions Pedagogies and 21st Century Technologies*. Gail Hawisher & Cynthia Selfe, eds. Utah State University Press, 1999.
- Davis, Robert and Mark Shadle. "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking." *CCC* 51:3, 2000.
- Dunn, Patricia. *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2001.
- George, Diana. "From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing." *CCC* 45:1, 2002.
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Other

- Shipka, Jody. “Gonna Make You Sweat: Composing a History of ‘This’ Space.” www.remediatethis.com/projects.
- . “Other People’s Lives: A Projection” in “Master Hands, A Video Mashup Round Table.” Eds. James J. Brown Jr. and Richard Marback. *Enculturation* 11 , 2011. <<http://enculturation.gmu.edu/master-hands>>
- . “Tripping the Decades.” www.remediatethis.com/projects.
- Plus samplings of former students’ projects (video-, print- and object-based), authorless/found texts, select textbook ads (from different composition journals), children’s books (usually focused around the theme of learning or doing school) Flickr and Blogger pages, YouTube videos, and the various texts students bring into class.