

This is a pre-print version of Bourelle et al's webtext, "Reflections in Online Writing Instruction: Pathways to Professional Development," published in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 20(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/20.1/praxis/bourelle-et-al>

Discussion Questions

Discussion Board Example #1

Students read Jody Shipka's "A Multimodal, Task-Based Framework for Composition"

Discussion Question (posed by Natalie Kubasek)

On Tuesday we went back and forth about the distinction between modes and mediums and about the pros and cons of allowing students to choose medium and audience for their projects. As part of the larger process of creating and/or revising our eComp prompts, I'd like this week's discussion to be a space for us to further hash out these ideas so that we can all individually arrive at a clearer understanding of mode, medium and the stakes of allowing students to choose their mediums and audiences.

First, reread this excerpt from Shipka's article "A Multimodal, Task-Based Framework for Composition":

At a time when many within composition studies have begun questioning the field's "single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language" (Kress 85), and its exclusion of the wide variety of sign systems and technologies students routinely engage, we might also begin asking how the purposeful uptake, transformation, incorporation, combination, juxtaposition, and even three-dimensional layering of words and visuals—as well as textures, sounds, and even tastes—provide us still with other ways of imagining the work students might do for the composition course. Given the field's strong tendency to "equate the activity of composing with writing itself, thereby missing the complex delivery systems through which writing circulates" (Trimbur 190), we need to do more than simply expand the media and communicative contexts in which students work. **Increasing the range of semiotic resources with which students are allowed to work will not, in and of itself, lead to greater awareness of the ways systems of delivery, reception, and circulation shape (and take shape from) the means and modes of production.** Instead, composition courses must present students with the opportunity to begin structuring the occasions for, as well as the reception and delivery of, the work they produce.

I am not suggesting that the work that the students produce for a course should be free from adhering to the standards associated within a specific communicative practice or genre. I am also not suggesting that the classroom become an intellectual free-for-all where assignments, due dates, and any expectation of student accountability is jettisoned as they become free to write when, how, or even if they want to. **I am suggesting that assignments that predetermine goals and narrowly limit the materials, methodologies, and technologies that students employ in service of those goals while**

ignoring the “complex delivery systems through which writing circulates” (Trimbur 190), perpetuate arhetorical, mechanical, one-sided views of production.

Rather than predetermining the specific materials and methodologies that students employ in the service of those goals, tasks (or assignments) should be structured in ways that ask students to assume *responsibility* for the following:

1. The product they will formulate in response to a given task—this might take the form of a printed text, a performance, a handmade or repurposed object, or should students choose to engineer a multipart or rhetorical event, any combination thereof
2. The operations, processes, or methodologies that will be (or could be) employed in generating that product—depending on what students aim to achieve, this might involve collecting data from texts, conducting surveys, interviews, or experiments, sewing, searching online, woodworking, filming, recording, shopping, staging rehearsals, etc.
3. The resources, materials, and technologies that will be (or could be) employed in the generation of that product—again, depending on what they aim to achieve, this could involve paper, wood, libraries, computers, needle and thread, stores, food, music, glue, tape, etc.
4. The specific conditions, under, or with which the final product will be experienced—this involves determining or otherwise structuring the delivery, reception, and/or circulation of their final product.

Of course, Shipka argues for reflection where students make clear their decisions for their choices.

Now, read over the following questions that connect Shipka's ideas to the questions about modes, mediums and audience that we discussed in class. Respond to at least two of these questions in your response.

1. From this excerpt, what do you infer are Shipka’s impressions of choosing medium and audience for the students within multimodal composition assignments? Would she agree with choosing the medium and/or audience for the students? Do you agree with Shipka? Why or why not?
2. From this excerpt and from our discussion in class, what can you determine are the definitions of mode and medium? We don’t all have to agree, but we can try to come up with definition we can all live with and structure our assignments around.
3. Zoe argued that by narrowing the parameters of the assignment (i.e., choosing medium), you’re simply privileging one medium over another (paraphrased). And, you may even be asking them to learn the technology instead of the complex rhetorical considerations required to produce a multimodal text. Agree or disagree? Why?

4. Shipka argues that we need to create assignments that prompt students to take responsibility for: "the operations, processes, or methodologies that will be (or could be) employed in generating that product—depending on what students aim to achieve." Is this too much responsibility for first year composition students to take on if they have not been exposed to the methodologies that might be necessary to achieve their desired products? How do we create an assignment that both allows students to take on this responsibility but also helps them in the process of choosing the best methodologies for achieving their products?

Discussion Board Example #2:

Students read Jennifer Sheppard's "The Rhetorical Work of Multimedia Production Practices: It's More than Just Technical Skill"

Discussion Question (posed by Maya Alapin)

Sheppard describes her high level of engagement with the *Sports Illustrated for Kids* site, particularly observing her interest in the "noisy little rollover buttons" (p. 127). In the next paragraph, she notes, "[s]tudent users overwhelmingly liked the sound effects as they were because they added an element of play to the experience" (p. 127). My questions are (discuss any or all of them): what is the role of play in multimodal learning? Is there some reason to feel that playful/fun assignments have less didactic value than more traditional assignments? Do we, as instructors, feel guilty when the students have a lot of fun in class/preparing projects, and does that shame/guilt keep us from embracing and introducing more multimodality? What is the role of play in college education?

(P.S. Here's the basis for my opinion on this matter: the classical Greek word for education was *paideia*. A *pais* is a child; *paideia* is therefore the activity of the little ones. Etymologically, the original word for 'education' **was** 'play').

Discussion Board Example #3:

Students read Qiyang Wang and Lit Woo Huay's "Comparing Asynchronous Online Discussions and Face-to-Face Discussions in a Classroom Setting"

Discussion Question (posed by Zoe Speidel)

It Does and It Doesn't: The Dilemmas of Asynchronous Discussion

Some brief notes about the article before we get started:

- Key areas of difference between asynchronous and face-to-face discussions:
 - **Access**—access can be disrupted with asynchronous because of technological or connection issues, etc.; this doesn't happen with face-to-face (though there is the issue of students not coming to class)

- **Timing**—asynchronous needs longer for a complete discussion to occur (students read, reflect, compose, and must wait for others to post before responding)
 - **Mode of Expression**—asynchronous discussion is done through written communication; may marginalize those who favor vocal; also text cannot pick up the same nuances of the human voice
 - **Visual Cues**—body language, etc. not possible as part of modes of expression in asynchronous; emoticons replace some of what is lost
- Top 5 Areas where students (in the study) had problems with discussions in general:
 - **Atmosphere**
 - **Responses**
 - **Efficiency**
 - **Interactivity**
 - **Communication**
 - Some Solutions (I focused on the solutions for problems in asynchronous discussions):
 - Online discussion questions should be fairly short to allow students to compose quick-enough answers and to read and respond to others?
 - Online discussion board questions need to be straightforward and clearly stated since there can be a lot of lag time between confusion and clarification (whether from instructor/question to student, or student to student)
 - Consider how prepared students are to answer question: will they have already done some reading, or will they be inclined to do a bit of research before submitting a response? Consider this when composing questions, especially in relation to length and complexity

Now for some things to talk about/questions...Feel free to discuss all of them, some of them, or none of them (though if you answer none I hope you'll be making some other, earth-shattering contribution to our understanding about leading asynchronous discussions).

While reading this article, I found myself taking notes that followed this pattern:

Asynchronous discussions do not require that students take extensive and detailed notes during class discussion to use later for inspiration **BUT** does this fit with our discussion about appropriation of ideas? Is this facilitating collaborative responding/knowledge creation, or is it encouraging plagiarism?

Asynchronous discussions encourage and see more equal participation from those often marginalized in classroom settings (shy, introverted, L2) **BUT** may make it difficult for students to express themselves using their home dialects (student cited that shifting into dialects when writing is much harder than when speaking).

Asynchronous discussions foster higher critical thinking because students are given more time to respond **BUT** students may feel more pressured to submit a well-composed, thoughtful response rather than just getting their ideas out without concern for grammatical structure or depth of thought.

Asynchronous discussions stay more focused and participants may be more critical and reflective, **BUT** it becomes nearly impossible to reach a consensus within the classroom, **AND** discussion takes longer because students are composing their responses rather than just sharing ideas that come up and which may develop throughout the discussion.

So for the first part of this week's discussion, I'd like us to think about how we can address these "**BUTs**" and "**ANDs**" in the online/asynchronous discussions we will be conducting next semester.

Some other questions that came up as I read:

In thinking about the length and complexity of the questions we pose in discussion boards, should we favor interactivity (with shorter questions) or writing practice (with longer, more prompt-like questions)?

Along this vein, what are some ways we can promote interaction? We have been talking about this a lot—Maya has been wondering if her students are reading her thoughtful responses, and Matthew suggested we get our students away from Blackboard and into a medium made specifically for social interaction. Do we need to have an outside medium to encourage interaction? What are our options for this (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Blogger)?

Students in this article's study reported “that online discussions could provide a better atmosphere than face-to-face discussions” (280). By atmosphere, the researchers mean promoting authenticity, comfort, and equal access, while mediating aggression and dominance (281-282). How are these factors considered in each stage of an asynchronous discussion? By “stages” I mean any step in the instructor’s process of creating, moderating, or summarizing the discussion.

At the beginning of this semester, I felt that because the online component (UNM Learn) was required for our classes, that I needed to make use of the asynchronous tools such as the discussion board. However, I have not utilized this much because I didn’t know how to “sync” it with in-class activities. How do you use discussion board responses (or other asynchronous forms of communication) to enhance what happens in your face-to-face class time? Do you feel that it adds something to the class and your students’ learning that could not be accomplished with face-to-face alone?

The authors state that certain tasks are more appropriate than others for asynchronous communication—do you follow their prescription of assigning problem-solving tasks in

asynchronous communication (273)? Or do you assign various kinds of tasks? What are some of the factors that influence these choices?