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The Rhetorical Work of Multimedia Production Practices: It's More than Just Technical Skill

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Abstract

Calls for multimodal communication are being heard with increasing frequency in composition and professional communication. Oftentimes, however, teaching multimedia *production* is viewed by those outside of the field as simply a matter of imparting technical skill rather than facilitating development of diverse and significant literacies. A closer look at these practices reveals how the complex choices made during production regarding audience, content, technology, and media can dramatically affect the final text and its reception by users. Rather than viewing multimodal production work as just technical skill, I argue that it requires careful attention to both traditional and technological rhetorical considerations. Better understanding these varied rhetorical practices specific to new media supports us in helping students to appreciate the constraints and possibilities of composing and offers support for the value of our work with multimedia to colleagues in other areas of English studies.

Keywords: Multimedia; New media; Production; Multiliteracies; Composition; Professional communication; Rhetoric; Pedagogy; Multimodality

When I agreed to create a science-based, multimedia web site for kids for a Forest Service Research Lab, I had little idea of what I was actually getting myself into. It quickly became apparent that this project would require far more than just knowledge of relevant software and basic web page creation. Soon, I was meeting with scientists, interviewing local school kids about their web usage, poring over state curricular guidelines, wrangling with a government agency's web standards, navigating the technological constraints of school networks, and much more. What started out as a modest attempt to present local ecological information soon spiraled into a complex, interactive, multimodal web site that took nearly 18 months to complete. Along the way, I became more conscious of the variety of sophisticated literacy and rhetorical practices necessary to create informative and engaging multimedia.

This article chronicles several significant development challenges from my experience as a designer on the Forest Service project as a way of drawing attention to the often-unseen rhetorical dimensions of production in multimedia composition. Rather than viewing development of multimedia as just technical skill, I argue that careful attention to practices of production can demonstrate the critical negotiations writers/designers[1] must undertake as they compose multimedia texts. These development activities build on traditional print-based literacies and rhetorical practices but require additional considerations in order to achieve the desired effects on intended audiences. Beyond established rhetorical concerns such as audience, purpose, and context, designers must also make rhetorical choices specific to the development of multimedia. These technological rhetorical considerations include decisions such as the appropriateness

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[1] I use the term "writers/designers" throughout this article to call attention to the diverse practices of both form and content development to which multimedia composers must attend.

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of technologies for a given situation and the selection and integration of media to facilitate reader/user comprehension of the text.

Oftentimes, teaching production of digital texts is viewed by those outside of the computers and composition field as simply a matter of imparting technical skill rather than facilitating development of diverse and significant literacies. Many administrators and colleagues within other areas of English studies do not see the intellectual and practical significance of this work for students and do not recognize the time and intellectual effort necessary to teach and support such composition. This article presents a closer look at the production process of a single multimedia text in order to demonstrate the complex integration of traditional and technological rhetorical practices required for the development of informative, persuasive, and engaging digital texts.

My motivation for writing this piece comes from two distinct yet related sources. First, when I began developing web and multimedia texts for coursework and clients a decade ago, and more recently when I began teaching these practices to my own students, I found a lack of resources bridging practice and theory to support this work. There are hundreds of practical books on the market on how to use software and related technologies, but few of these consider technological rhetorical issues such as how site architecture should be organized to reach target audiences or how integration of video files might impact accessibility for users with different connection speeds to the Internet. Instead, these books are generally concerned with the physical manipulation of applications and provide guidance through step-by-step instructions (e.g., click here, move this there) but do not engage with the contexts in which such technical manipulations are embedded.

On the theory side, the past 15 years have seen increasing calls for the integration of multimedia and multiliteracies into the disciplines of composition and professional communication. Research on multimodal composition has included arguments for expanding our students' range of communicative literacies (Anderson, 2003; Ball & Kalmbach, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Lemke, 1998; New London Group, 2000; Selber, 2004; Selfe, 1999, 2004), as well as for better preparing them for academic, professional, and civic expectations through development of greater technological capacity (iText Working Group, 2001; Kress, 2003; Williams, 2001; Yancey, 2004). While this work has made a compelling case for action, much of it has been theoretically oriented, leading to difficulty translating these ideas into classroom pedagogy and rhetorically purposeful production practices.

My second motivation for writing this piece comes out of my position as an untenured faculty member who is considered *the* technology person for my department. Although I was hired as a specialist in digital media and professional communication, I often find that some colleagues and administrators have little idea of what it is I actually teach, how much time it takes, or why the theoretically informed, project-based approaches I use matter. Some mistakenly see these production-oriented courses as simply a matter of passing on computer skills rather than doing the more valued work of theory, analysis, and argumentation, and they often have little understanding of how this multimedia development work connects to the academic goals of an English department. Although many teachers/scholars in our field have pioneered approaches to teaching with communication and media technologies, they are still often met with similar misperceptions and resistance from colleagues and administrators on their own campuses (Journet, 2007). Such attitudes have repercussions for how faculty are evaluated, for how resources are allocated, and most importantly, for what learning experiences are available to students.

With these motivations in mind, this piece sets out to draw attention to the technological rhetorical work of multimedia production practices through reflection on an extended project. Relying on daily written field notes and analysis of the completed project, I offer three examples of rhetorical issues specific to new media development that are highly relevant to composing practices in the classroom. Following this discussion, I provide several recommended practices for how the lessons learned from this project can be used to shape multimodal assignments in composition and professional communication courses.

1. Multimedia development project overview

The examples and discussion that follow come from reflection on a web-based multimedia project I developed over 18 months for a U.S. Forest Service Research Lab (FSRL). The primary intention of this multimodal piece (called the "Kids' Corner") was to communicate locally related, ecologically and scientifically based information in a way that was appealing and informative to the target audience. We (the Lab's scientific research staff and I, working as a technical communicator and web developer) chose to focus the site's content on students in roughly sixth to eighth grade because research on state curricular science guidelines indicated this age range had the knowledge base to understand