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NOTES TOWARD A “REFLECTIVE INSTRUMENTALISM”

*A Collaborative Look at Curricular Revision in Clemson
University’s MAPC Program*

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The faculty of Clemson University’s MAPC program—rhetoricians and professional communications specialists of various kinds—gather this Monday, as we do weekly, to continue our work: designing, implementing, and enhancing the “MAPC,” our M.A. program in professional communication. Rich in theory and practice, it’s a program benefiting from the attention provided by frequent faculty discussions. Our current task is one that continuing graduate programs take up periodically: reviewing and revising a reading list for a comprehensive exam, in our case the MAPC oral exam keyed to the MAPC reading list.

Today, we begin our discussions by focusing on a central programmatic issue for all technical communication programs, raised in an email sent by a new colleague, Sean Williams:

I had two students in my office this week trying to figure out just what on earth social construction has to do with writing a memo and why they need to know Cicero to write a good proposal. “Just give me the format, Dr. Williams, and I’ll write it,” they say in not so many words. I think this is a huge curriculum issue, too, at the grad level because the perceived bifurcation (is that word too strong?) of the program begs the question of “fundamental” knowledge for proceeding in the program. Why aren’t students required to take 490/690, “Technical Writing,” but are required to take classical rhetoric? I don’t mean to imply that they should be separated because I don’t think they should be.

However, I'm not sure that we as a faculty are clear on exactly how the areas are connected, and the result is confused students and perhaps a confused faculty. We need, IMHO, to articulate, in writing, goals that unite the two threads in a mission statement or something like it because this type of focused attention on "What do we do?" necessarily precedes "How do we do it?" Revising the reading list is a "How do we do it?" consideration. And, not to be too self-aware, but would defining "what do we *do*?" be reflective instrumentalism?

In his recent *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in a College Classroom*, Russel Durst (1999) tracks the competing agendas of students and faculty in first-year composition studies classrooms. Like our MAPC students, Durst's composition students want practical help; like Durst's colleagues, we faculty want theory and critique as well. It's another version of the theory/practice divide, with faculty on one side, students on another, what Durst—and before him, Patrick Moore (1996, 1999), Carolyn Miller (1979, 1996) and Robert Johnson (1998a, 1999), among others (see Bridgeford 2002)—couches as a conflict between two impulses: on the one hand, students' "instrumentalism" and on the other, faculty theorizing.

Durst's (1999) curricular reply to this tension is what he calls "reflective instrumentalism," which, he says, "preserves the intellectual rigor and social analysis of current pedagogies without rejecting the pragmatism of most . . . students. Instead, the approach accepts students' pragmatic goals, offers to help them achieve their goals, but adds a reflective dimension that, while itself useful in the work world, also helps students place their individual aspirations in the larger context necessary for critical analysis" (178).

Which leads us to ask the following questions:

Would Durst's concept of reflective instrumentalism provide a useful way of framing our program in professional communication? If so, what changes to the program might it recommend?

Would other concepts already part of the culture of the program—such as "professionalism" or "reflective practice"—provide framings more congruent with the program? What changes might they recommend, particularly if they were made a more explicit or integral part of the program?

Are there other ways we might think about the program, especially about the relationship we seek to establish between rhetoric and technology?

How might we use these framings to develop a language to explain our expectations to students—and to ourselves?

In the pages that follow, we'll take up these questions as we narrate the process of revising the reading list for the MAPC. We'll approach this task as participant-observers of our program and our processes of curricular design. Additionally, in narrating the processes that we used in our curricular decisions, we'll explore the possibilities for representing these processes textually and our rationales for why we choose to represent them as we do. Our reading list is, of course, only one of many representations we could make of our process: other representations include MAPC recruiting materials, our MAPC handbook, and MAPC graduates themselves.

In conducting this study, then, we hoped to build an understanding of

1. the processes we used to review our program
2. the ways we represent that process textually in different rhetorical situations
3. a consideration of what those representations do to the process and our understanding of it

In other words, we want to consider a final reflective question: what does the means of representation suggest about the program itself, and how will it affect the very program under scrutiny?

Equally important, we hope that, in creating this reflective account of our revision process, we make a successful argument that other programs might also try such a collaborative revision themselves. Such curricular revision isn't often consciously observed or reported on, nor is it often theorized, yet (ironically) given its influence on students, it's critical. The key factor, as we found, is to *work together*. In other words, we chose not to assign this task to a subgroup of a larger committee or to a special task force, but to take it up as a committee of the whole. We knew in proceeding this way that the process would take more time, would be more cumbersome, would require considerable negotiating skills. We understood that, vested as we all are in what we think is important, we were taking a risk, that negotiations could break down, even fail. At the same time, we found, and we think others will as well, that both process (articulating together our goals for the program and ways these are realized in a set of readings) and product (the revised list) are worth the risk and effort.

We have many ways to narrate the story of our process, all of which comment differently on the values of the program itself. We could simply record it, for instance, by noting that we began work on the reading list in the fall and concluded in the spring. We met weekly, some of us

routinely, others as time and other responsibilities permitted—as we taught classes, wrote papers, attended conferences, recruited new faculty, developed a new undergraduate Writing and Publication Studies major. Representing the process this way indicates that *major curricular issues are a matter of course for the committee of the whole*, responsibilities that we took up seriously. That itself is both claim and statement about the program.

We could also tell our story through numbers. We began with twelve categories, including among them topics that were identical with our five core courses: Visual Rhetoric; Workplace Communication; Classical Rhetoric; Introduction to Professional Writing; and Research Methods in Professional Communication. Included as well were other categories that seemed to play a role in the program, although the role wasn't always clear: Literacy, Technology, International Communication. We began with forty-four items and were committed to maintaining that number, to resisting the impulse to grow the list. To accommodate the impulse, yet stay close to our target number of items, we created an archival list of all the items that could be included and worked from those. We also spoke as though all the categories were equal, although as individuals we had preferences, and it wasn't difficult to discern what those were. Given the number of items and the number of categories, each category—from Classical Rhetoric to International Communication—seemed eligible for about four entries. Representing the process this way would indicate that we value a certain conservative structure, that we like to explore the possibility of expanding our reach, but that at the end of the day we like to come home to the familiar, where everything has its place.

We could also tell our story through understandings, specifically our understandings about the process we should use for revision. Some of us thought that we should use the old list as a point of departure and should proceed by revising this list, understanding that to add a new text, we had to drop an old one. Some of us thought we should work from a blank slate to build a new list. Some of us thought we should focus on certain underrepresented areas—technology and diversity among them. Some of us felt passionately about our favorite figures and texts and thought that others should see the list through our theoretical lenses. And when passions were strong, we used our communication symbol—a “Fight Club” button, a promotional pin from Brad Pitt's

movie by the same name popular at the time—to signal that an individual had become overly invested in their personal preferences. The “Fight” button—which even now is seen by some as sign of negotiation, by others as sign of friction—became a part of the process, a material token of the work to which we are all committed.



We are choosing, however, to tell our story *primarily* through our individual voices, in part because this individualism is ultimately what we value in the MAPC program and hope to teach students: a respect for a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, personalities, and passions. In part, we hope, through this way of telling the story, to work in *palimpsest* (de Certeau 1984; Barton and Barton 1993), to include in our collective story here traces and vestiges of how it came to be. In other words, the new reading list itself is one map to the program. But how that map was created can itself be mapped, and that too is our aim.

Our listserv makes such a representation possible. Listen in as we enter *in medias res* to Mark Charney, the chair of MAPC, summarizing the review of one meeting:

Dear Kathleen (and MAPC Committee): Here are the best notes I can muster up from the meeting you missed. Please forgive me if I’ve misrepresented anyone! We discussed primarily visual communication, and plan next week to discuss professional communication theory, ideology, and teaching/pedagogy, so please, MAPCers, come to the meeting with good notes about what you want to do with each of the next three fields.

Sean began the meeting not only with great ideas about vis comm, but also samples and examples of each of the following.

1. Jacqueline Glasgow’s “Teaching Visual Literacy for the 21st century” for its emphasis on decoding images, making passive observers active, and its explanation of semiotics.
2. Williams and Harkus’s “Editing Visual Media” for its emphasis on the verbal vs. the visual, especially its practical bent (and the good example of a ball vs. a basketball, etc.)
3. A PRIMER OF VISUAL LITERACY, Chapters Two and Three: one offers guidelines for visual literacy, a good overview, and the other, basic elements of visual communication.
4. Edward R. Tufte’s new chapter 2 in VISUAL EXPLANATIONS, and chapters 4 and 5 in the old book to keep terms like Chat Junk, etc.

5. DESIGNING VISUAL LANGUAGE by Kostelnick and Roberts, especially chapters 1 and 2 which tie rhetoric to visual.

Now here is where I break down in terms of who suggested what. Both Tharon and Chris had a say here, and all three agreed, as did the rest of the committee there, about the worth of the [texts] below. It wasn't a fight club situation at all, and we got through this in record time, so much so that it surprised us into being unprepared to move on, so we adjourned early! (well, ok, only a few minutes early)

6. Kress and Van Leduwen's *READING IMAGES*, Chapters 2 and 3 about narrative theory and visual communication, especially the linguistics of visual design. Also, possibly chapter 4 which deals with modality.
7. Karen Schriver's *DYNAMICS IN DOCUMENT DESIGN*, pages 168–181 (this was Tharon's I remember), which deals somewhat with usability studies and technical brochures.
8. Carl mentioned a new book by Kenneth Hager with one chapter on Visual Communication. He plans to give us the exact reference next week.
9. Sean encouraged us to keep the Elizabeth Keyes already on the list, while everyone finally agreed to keep everyone already there, especially Barton and Barton, who everyone agreed was a clear introduction for uninitiated students, and Maitra/Goswami, the Kostelnick on the list, etc.
10. Also, *EDITING: THE DESIGN OF RHETORIC*, the final chapter about typesetting and production, was mentioned as something that may help basic students. By Sam DRAGGA and GWENDOLYN GONG.

Some discussion ensued about how this was often the first class most students took and how it has to begin very basically. The Hilligoss book was mentioned by Barbara Heifferon, who uses it successfully in the classroom, but using it would break our rule not to use our own texts in the classroom.

Finally, we agreed to make two lists—one the reading list for orals, and the other, a list of all of these related texts, each significant to students in the field and to students researching theses and projects. Such a list could be updated every year for the orientation MAPC book, making that list a current one from which we could update the orals list anytime we wanted.

I apologize if this is rough, or if I've given credit to anyone for something he or she may not want! See you next, and every Monday . . .

Mark Charney

Sometimes discussions that seemed to be about one issue—the one previously mentioned about visual rhetoric, for instance—turned out to

be about others; and always in the background was the question: *Who is the MAPC student?*

It would be almost impossible to define the ideal student.

Beth Daniell

I agree. What I'm driving at in using this term is actually something like "what should every MAPC student leave the program with?" I'm not thinking here in terms of discursively forming ideal students, but rather of a minimum set of qualifications and knowledge that all students should possess, much like the list that you offered: theory, practice and technical expertise. The tricky part is figuring out what "theory," what "practice," and what "expertise" we're talking about. Is theory rhetorical theory or is it professional communication theory? They're related certainly, but not by any means the same. Is practice, writing seminar papers or creating multimedia? Again, they're related, but not the same. Is expertise a theoretical expertise or knowing how to use computers well?

The separations are a matter of emphasis and it seems to me that this emphasis needs to be fleshed out a little more by having conversations like that we had today. It was EXTREMELY helpful in helping me to understand the way the people in this program view what the program does. Now that I have a little more context on "what it is that we do" I can make more informed choices about what to include/exclude from the reading list.

Sean Williams

Who is the MAPC student? This question haunted the process, as we understood our role in defining and constructing that figure. Still the student, as Beth Daniell suggests, eludes us.

Continuing to beat this poor horse, I don't think we can always be more specific. I want students to have some sense of technology. What does that mean? I don't think it means everyone has to design Web sites. I think a lot of it is what the student wants it to mean. They are agents in this process, not empty containers. While I understand your need for definition, I have been teaching way too long to think that my categories or yours are adequate to cover all the students. We set up the framework in which individuals and teachers work. The outcome is not up to us. I'm constantly amazed at what my students come up with—and like you, they often complain that I am not being clear enough.

Beth Daniell

At some point, our negotiations on *who is the MAPC student* turned from abstract to particularized as we began to horse-trade—“I’ll trade you a Landow for a Plato”—to represent what we thought every MAPC student should know. To accomplish this, we all forwarded nominations for each category, not to select winners, but to show patterns. We called them *tallies*. (Language matters.) It wasn’t a flawless process, and it provided a set of questions that continue to beguile us.

How to negotiate?

As implied previously, having a written record helps; here Kathleen Yancey provides context for understanding the tallies.

Draft of Nominations for Reading List for MAPC

Context: Not everyone sent in tallies. Not everyone voted for three per category, so I just counted the number up to three. Not everyone sent only three per category, so I just counted the first three. If you numbered them, I took the top three.

A couple of suggestions appeared that had not been mentioned or discussed previously. I did not include them on the list.

Issues: Presence?

Absence?

The categories: do we need all of them? Two folks mentioned that they would dispense with teaching, one that we could dispense with literacies.

Should all categories be equally weighted?

What’s the role of the current list?

How do these items compare to what’s on the current list?

Some items are repeated—Faigley and Barton and Barton—come to mind.

Can we cross-reference some items?

Is diversity sufficiently represented?

Is technology sufficiently represented?

When we look at the list, what student have we constructed?

In the background, as we sorted through the tallies, discussions related to our questions continued. A major discussion involved the relationship of rhetoric to professional communication, as Martin Jacobi explains:

I guess I’m wondering still what constitutes “rhetoric” for you. I’m hoping it’s not something like “bombastic discourse having no relation to the real world,

to what professional writers—whoever they may be—do for a living." I'm trying to imagine the nature of "professional documents outside the frame of rhetoric" but I'm coming up empty. When Ornatowski talks about the engineer who has to write a report that will sell to potential customers an engine that will not start in cold weather, he talks about the rhetorical choices—and ethical choices (since any action, as opposed to motion, is necessarily ethical invested)—that the engineer is making. It's clearly a rhetorical document that Ornatowski's engineer is talking about.

I would agree that reading Aristotle is not the most effective way of teaching or learning ethics, but what's your point? If you're saying that pro com uses case studies and not theory to do things, then aren't you contradicting your earlier claim that pro com is theoretically sophisticated? Aristotle pointed out that he wrote his *Art o' Rhetoric* because teachers of rhetoric were only using something like case studies for their students.

Sometimes in the middle of all this discussion would arrive a listserv post from somebody outside our dialogue that reminded us that we were hardly alone in sorting out these issues:

Last spring in *Time* or *Newsweek* there was a big article on Careers[,] and Technical Writing was featured heavily as a good bet for college students. We used it to help us bolster our argument for an interdisciplinary graduate certificate in professional writing.

Irene Ward, from WPA-L (listserv)

The horse trading continued. It was smart; it was social; it was (of course) rhetorical. We made connections between other professional contexts and this one; we used such comparisons to think about what would best help students.

I'm thinking ahead to our next meeting and urging everyone come with a text or two to "be flexible" on. I think we are good enough horse traders to do this? Our task is not as daunting as it may seem. I counted 54 texts, and if we get down to 45 (shoot for less and see how that goes), that's only 9 to give up. I came up with that number because we are doing fewer chapters in Latour and Woolgar (e.g.) and others.

I'm also reading for absences. As peer reviewer for *TCQ* . . . I've reviewed a number of tech comm pieces. . . . My reviews have included some alarm about lack of awareness of something other than our good ol Yanqui point of view (I realize how strange this sounds in S[outh] C[arolina]). When I get the reviews back with other reviewers' comments as well, they are picking up on

the same thing. All this to say that I'm concerned that we may not yet represent a voice of someone other than ourselves for the good of our students who will go out and work in a world that, surprise, does not look exactly like us. Thus we need at least Freire on board or someone that makes this point. There may be a better rep. I'm open. Unless I missed something on the list, I don't see us doing this.

I wouldn't mind trading a Doheny-Farina and Harraway for a chapter from Harding that addresses a couple of absences. The one that covers standpoint theory (also one of Tharon's lenses in his book) might serve. It's at home, I'll send the chapter # later. Harraway is so dense, though God(dess) knows I love her, she makes Vitanza read like a Sunday school picnic (most likely an abominable mixed metaphor).

Barbara Heifferon

Trading itself, of course, isn't an easy process. We understood our choices as signs, as representations. We read multiple gestalts into such a list, as Chris Boese self-referentially suggests:

Chris won't give up Harraway. And Chris wants Freire. Classic struggle with canons. You know what it is. For new points of view to come in, something sacred has to go.

I'm not trying to be intransigent here, but I have a different point of view on the list. The old list is dangerously deficient in the area of technology. Quite a bit needs to go in there to bring it up to speed with what is going on in the world. I am as much of a horsetrader as anyone, but I don't think technology should be the thing that has to "give" as much as other areas do. Of course reasonable people may disagree. But if serious room for technological issues and technology criticism isn't made on the list, I believe there will be major credibility problems with it.

Other areas have long held place on the list. Like Rhetorical Theory. They are the 900 pound gorillas. Technology scholarship is newer and having great impact in the field, changing the landscape of the field even as we speak. If our list doesn't make room for it, it won't be because tech is a yearling gorilla, it will be because those of us who advocate for it haven't done a good enough job in making the case. The field is changing, with or without us. We just have to decide if we want our list to actually reflect that change.

In the end, as Barbara Heifferon's concluding post attests, the process worked—

I wanted to tell you the good news in case no one else had. . . . At MAPC today, after a meeting that lasted under an hour, we went from a reading list

of 62 down to 46!! Trades were made and collegiality remained intact after a few vigorous conversations. . . . I think it's a great list. I took notes as did Mark, and someone will get the final list ready for fall!! We did cheat a bit (folding a few readings of same authors together, just a couple)

—if by “worked” we mean that we had a new list that most of us would agree was better and that we had negotiated well. The list: it's appended. It's not perfect. But *most* of us would agree, on *most* days, that it's better. And it's different: some eleven items are new. Some of our favorites—from Harraway to Bakhtin—didn't make it. But they are on the archival list, and they are available for another (negotiating) day. And although second-year graduate students have been given the transitional option of using the old or new list, the new students are using this list, and we are finding it a better fit for most of the core courses. As Sean Williams, Barbara Hefferon, and Kathleen Yancey (2000) put it at CPTSC 2000, “Students who have seen the new list make positive comments about it because the list manages to bring what seem to be opposite poles—reflection and instrumentalism—into a single reading list that represents the current state of our discipline.” (See <http://www.cptsc.org/conferences/conference2000/Williams.html>.)



We began this chapter, as we began the revision of the list, with an interest in bringing theory and practice together. The new list doesn't completely resolve this divide because we ourselves are still resolving it; probably we should have understood that it's too large and too complex a divide for this single curricular practice to resolve. But we have seen that we can negotiate: we can compose a list that constructs a student we'd like to see develop within our program and whose development is fostered by our new reading list. The program, in other words, is dynamic: it is able to accommodate both change and the tensions accompanying such change.

As Bernadette Longo puts it,

Now that we've gone through one iteration of this process for revising the MAPC reading list, it seems that we've played out the issue that motivated this revision in the first place: “the perceived bifurcation . . . of the program” between theory and practice. We entered this process on high theoretical ground, positing topics that should be included in a reading list that reflected the important conversations in our field. (Actually, I'm not sure we agree on what our field is, but that's another chapter.) We all put forward readings in

these categories based on theories and philosophical points of view informing our own research and teaching. But as weeks went by and the discussions ground on, it seemed that we slipped unnoticed into the arena of practicalities as the size of the list and the pressures of compromise constrained us. By the end of the year, many of our discussions were shaped by the need to keep the list at about 44 items and also to include representative works from all 12 of our original topic areas. . . .

The intent of revising the list was theoretical, but the revision process turns out to be mostly practical. Once again, questions of “how do we do it” seemed to overwhelm questions of “what do we do.” As Sean has mentioned in postrevision discussions, I’m not sure we have a handle yet on the question of what we do (as a program) when we shape our MAPC students’ graduate studies. I think we have come up with a more current reading list through this process, and that’s good. I’m not convinced, though, that we have better articulated the intent and objectives of our graduate program. Maybe that discussion needs to take place separately from the reading list revision process.

Which, of course, it has, through our later discussions—on exams, on projects and theses, on discussions about the kinds of experiences we hope to offer students.

Ultimately, that we didn’t resolve the theory/practice split, or that Durst’s (1999) construct didn’t inform the entire process, or that we all feel there are still some gaps in the list doesn’t matter as much as it may appear: this is not an exercise in Katz’s (1992) expediency. What ultimately matters is that in the processes of (1) renegotiating our reading list and (2) negotiating the way we have chosen to represent it here, we discovered that we can practice what we preach to students: that successful communication, even involving the creation of reading lists, requires recognition and negotiation among many competing voices. In Durstian terms, we have had it both ways: in instrumental terms, we both accomplished the task and continued to reflect on the list, on the program, on the processes informing it, and on ways to weave together theory and practice into a coherent curricular whole.

In thinking about how and why such a process might be useful for others, we’d observe

- that participating in such a curricular revision can be a significant socializing activity, certainly for new faculty members, but also for more senior faculty as they interact with their new colleagues and with the possibilities for curricular revision;

- that it provides all faculty with a chance to examine how the field—and even the definition of the field—has changed since the last list was constructed;
- that engaging all program faculty in developing and maintaining a graduate program seems to require the kind of commitment realized in curricular negotiations and that these negotiations may entail friction and require delicacy and humor;
- that after having participated in this process, faculty understand the rationale explaining why individual readings are on the list as well as how the readings relate to each other, and they therefore are more inclined to see the list as a total package (rather than a set of disparate readings) and can explain this to students;
- that a reading list is just that, only a list; in a healthy curriculum, any list is necessarily and always penultimate given its contextualization within many other readings and experiences and the fact that it too will be revised;
- that the value of the list is likewise never fully understood until it is used by students and faculty together; and
- that what we have outlined here—by specific observations and linguistic montage—is a process, one more difficult and less efficient than if we had tasked it to a smaller group, but one more rhetorically productive. We created an opportunity to bring people together to communicate about things that matter: to write the program representing us and constructing students.

In short, we modeled for students the ways we'd like them to behave. The best we could do for students is to maintain a vestige of this idea in the reading list—and we did. We think this, too, may be one of the benefits of a collaborative curricular design.

THE READING LIST

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