The Impetus for Making Digital Writing a University Wide GE Requirement: The Process and Outcome

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This paper gives an account of how I designed a digital writing course for California State University Northridge's English Department, and then proposed it as a General Education (GE) course for the university. More importantly, this paper describes what it took me to push the course through multiple stages of curriculum review before its final approval by the university's Educational Policies Committee (EPC), a faculty senate standing committee, as a GE course. I am sharing this experience to make a case that it's possible to convince the whole university community on the importance of digital composing, and that is the direction we as a field should be taking moving forward. Digital writing benefits students in writing and rhetoric programs, but it has the potential to benefit the entire student body of any institution of higher education.

Justification for a Digital Writing Course in a GE Category

In the official proposal, I justified the need for a digital writing course as a GE on three major grounds: Firstly, as a response to the gap in the English Department and the University's current course offerings; secondly, as an opportunity to join the momentum i.e. "digital turn" in the discipline of Writing Studies; and thirdly, as an approach to address the composition and communication needs of our students in the 21st century digital world.

Gap in the English Department and the University's Course Offerings

As soon as I joined California State University Northridge in 2014, I noticed that the school's course offerings did not include any courses related to digital composing, such as writing in the electronic environments, new media composition, multimodal composition, web writing, and composing across media. The existing writing courses included a first-year-writing sequence; business communication; intermediate expository writing; report writing;

composition and the professions; literacy, rhetoric and culture; writing about literature; and advanced expository writing for teachers. So, there clearly existed a gap that I could fill by introducing a course on digital media and composition.

The focus of my course, ENGL 315: Digital Writing, was on production of multiple digital texts—podcasts, documentaries, websites, digital portfolios, and collaborative online articles, among others. In that sense, the course primarily engaged video, audio, and web production processes both theoretically and pragmatically, aiming to give students insights and hands-on practice on how these different media and genres work in and respond to different rhetorical situations.

The following was/is the exact catalog description for the course:

> This course focuses on production of an array of digital texts, such as podcast, website, documentary, e-portfolio, blog, and collaborative online article. Other topics include social media, digital identity, and ethical questions surrounding the production and distribution of texts in digital environments. The course underscores the expanded notion of writing—the idea that writing includes print, but also multimodal compositions done by using mediums, such as sound, video, images, web, graphics, and animation (Available for General Education, Information Competence, Lifelong Learning).

In my proposal, I argued that while Department of Communication Studies on campus offered an excellent course on digital rhetoric (COMS 464), there was fundamental difference in focus between that course and my proposed course. While the primary focus of COMS 464 was on critical/rhetorical analysis of digitally produced texts, my course focused on actual production of multiple digital texts, which made my course more generic with broader appeal. This orientation towards production also distinguished my course from some very specialized courses around a particular mode of communication being offered in CSUN's Department of Cinema and Television Arts (CTVA), such as CTVA 230: Fundamentals of Audio Production; 240: Fundamentals of Video Production; 330: Advanced Audio Production; and CTVA 340: Advanced Video Production and Editing. These CTVA courses were highly specialized in that they dedicated a full year (two semesters) in exploring the communication possibilities with a single audio or video medium, as opposed to my proposed course which covered more grounds, more broadly, in a short time span (a semester). I particularly highlighted in the proposal the fact that this course was unique to the GE curriculum as well. Clarifying this distinction was important to establish the point that my course

had different goals, and was targeted to slightly different student populations on campus.

Joining the Momentum in Writing Studies

Next, I framed introducing digital writing course in the GE curriculum as an opportunity to join the momentum ("digital turn") in the discipline of writing studies. Our field took a "digital turn" around the millennium, and courses in digital writing started to become an integral part of the undergraduate major/minor in writing and rhetoric. There were similar moves in graduate programs too. The courses in digital writing across institutions, for instance, are variously named as: "Becoming Digital: Writing about Media Change" (MIT), "Digital Writing" (Duke and Syracuse), "Writing Across Media" (U of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), "Writing in and for Digital Environments" (Dickinson College), and "Multimedia Writing", and "Digital Composing" (U of Kentucky). Invoking this precedence and national trend proved to be a single most effective rhetorical move for me as it happened to have a powerful impact on different committees weighing on in this course's potential as a GE course. Other than our department's composition committee, the first one to review the proposal, all other committees—from curriculum committee, a separate committee in our home department to review a new course syllabus, to academic council in the College of Humanities, and educational polices committee (EPC), a faculty standing committee at the university level, through which my proposal had to make its headway—had questions about whether such a course existed elsewhere in the country. Even though content for those courses across different institutions slightly differed from one another for all kinds of contextual reasons, this reference helped me establish the point that we were lagging behind and needed to catch up with offerings in other peer institutions.

There certainly were theoretical conversations about the need for multimodal composition and digital writing to draw on, which preceded the curricular responses, as discussed above. I briefly noted in the justification section of the proposal that New London Group's much celebrated theory of multiliteracies in 1996, for example, explicitly engaged the idea of multimodal writing. Many rhetoric and composition scholars have theorized similar approaches to engage the notion of literacy, specifically writing, in the composition classroom. The list includes, among others, scholars like Cynthia Selfe, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Stuart Selber, Anne Wysocki, Geoffrey Sirc, and Jody Shipka, who contend that since writing includes signifying practices in multiple mediums—print, visual, aural, graphics, animation and such—writing instruction should consider this plurality of composing mediums and at-

tempt to scaffold students' composing abilities in all possible modalities of expression. Multiple studies into students' literacy practices have also shown that our students are writing more than ever with a great variety of composing technologies and forums that are widely available to them (Yancey, 2009; Lenhart, 2012; Lenhart et al., 2008; Madden et al., 2013; Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich, 2013), but our instruction is lagging behind in engaging those practices in our classrooms.

I further added that given this discrepancy between students' regular literacy practices and composition instruction, Jessie Moore et al. (2016) express the fear that our "students are moving beyond the scope of many writing pedagogies" (p. 9). Similar questions and concerns are also raised by other scholars in the field. For instance, Geoffrey Sirc (2012) notes that rhetoric and composition has yet to fully embrace the composing technologies other than the traditional print. If this continues, he notes, it's very likely that our writing instruction becomes increasingly irrelevant to the literate lives of our students.

A few other theoretical and pedagogical insights I drew on included more sophisticated discussion of digital writing and pedagogies in the field. Randall McClure (2011), for instance, speaks of web 3.0, and discusses "how the Semantic Web might alter the research process and, more importantly, the research-writing relationship" (p. 316). William I. Wolff (2013) claims that web 2.0 spaces "have their own grammars, styles, and linguistics" and that the "effective and successful compositional engagement with Web 2.0 applications…requires an evolving interactive set of practices" (p. 212). He further argues our literacy learning of these practices can transform how we understand writing and how we teach this art within and outside of a Web 2.0 ecosystem. Wolff calls for productively engaging these various writing spaces and modes in our writing classrooms.

Similarly, Rebecca Tarsa (2015) calls new forums of writing available to students "digital participation sites" which "offer a wide range of opportunities for deploying both digital and alphabetic literacy skills, and have proven incredibly successful in creating the literacy engagement that frequently proves elusive in composition instruction" (p. 12). She maintains that most of our students "are active in digital participation spaces at some point in their lives (Jenkins et al.), [which] makes them a rich site of inquiry for theorizing literacy engagement, especially in relation to students' existing everyday literacy activity and practices" (p. 12). All of these scholars are pointing to an exigence that calls for a more robust engagement with digital mediums and spaces in writing classrooms.

The notion of digitality itself is deeply explored and fleshed out in the published scholarship. Yancey (2004a) writes that "[P]rint and digital overlap, intersect, become intertextual" (p. 89), implying that print is closely connect-

ed with digitality. In fact, the field of digital rhetorics in general has framed multimodal writing as composing with digital technologies and has explored the ways to develop assignments that support students' work with a great variety of semiotic resources. For instance, J. Elizabeth Clark (2010) adopted e-portfolio, blogging and digital storytelling in order to prepare students for the future of writing which, in her view, is "based on a global, collaborative text, where all writing has the potential to become public" (p. 28). She called it "an intentional pedagogy of digital rhetoric" (p. 28) aimed to foster interactivity, collaboration, and sense of ownership and authority among students. Rebecca Wilson Lundin experimented with what she calls a "networked" pedagogy, and used Wikis as the productive site for practicing networked pedagogy as students interacted with each other in the network in "a completely user-editable environment" (p. 433) blurring the roles of author and reader, thus calling into question the traditional authority of writers and readers.

I wrapped up this point in the proposal with the observation that even though some scholars in the field have persuasively argued for the value of multimodal and digital composing practices and the learning that occurs in the process, the implementation of digital writing instruction has remained nominal in many writing programs. The attempts at implementing multimodal approaches are sporadic at best. Multimodality and digitality—so highly hailed in scholarship as the means of preparing the writers and communicators of the future—is largely ignored in most writing classrooms. Frankly speaking, digital writing is still far from being a norm in the majority of writing classes. While many writing instructors have incorporated multimodal or digital writing assignments in their lower division required writing classes within a mix of other traditional print-based assignments, an upper division full-fledged digital writing course in GE category is something rarely seen and heard of.

Responding to the Current Communication and Composing Needs of our Students

The final justification I had for the need to introduce this course was to respond to the need for students to develop an ability to compose across media in this age of information and communication technologies. Given the rapidity with which the writing and publishing technologies evolve and change, our students need to develop that core competency and learn to keep up with the new literacy practices that emerge with advancements in technologies throughout their lives. Only then will they be able to navigate the communication and composition challenges of a highly mediated world. Engaging the new and emerging modes of composing in this class is one way to expose

students to multifarious ways writing can be done. Such an engagement allows students to explore all available modes of composing (including print) fully before making a final choice of medium for communication. Overall, this course made an important case that exploring and appropriating emerging media technologies to our composing and communication needs is and should be a lifelong learning for all our students. Only that learning habit can save them from trailing behind and becoming irrelevant in the future world of even more complex composition and communication needs. Even though I did not highlight how multimodal composing happens in different disciplinary contexts, which I could have to make the case even stronger, the course definitely encouraged students to draw connections with their own home disciplines when they conceived of and completed the projects. For instance, some student documentary projects in Fall 2017 consisted of topics like DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), gentrification, voter turnout in American, gun violence, net neutrality, anger management, CSU's EO 1100, and housing bubble, which represent a diverse set of themes drawn from different academic disciplines. The topic choices for Wikipedia featured-length article projects were even more diverse in terms of their traditional disciplinary location. Students' choices were directly influenced by what their majors are and what they want to see covered or extensively discussed in Wikipedia.

Course Outline

The course had four primary goals: Students would

- gain experience with a variety of digital writing tools and platforms;
- explore the rhetorical effects of different media;
- build upon their current levels of experience and expertise with digital writing; and
- read a series of texts that explore practical and philosophical issues related to digital writing.

Similarly, the course had 5 major assignments: Digital Literacy Narrative (10%), Audio Movie Review (20%), Collaborative Documentary Production (20%), Collaborative Wikipedia Article (20%), and Digital Portfolio (20%). In addition to these major assignments, students also regularly responded to course readings (10%) in the form of blog posts in their own digital portfolios. As far as the thematic structure of the course, my course had four different units focused on different modalities of composing: Unit I: Digital Narratives and Composing with Sound; Unit II: Composing with Video; Unit III: Collaborative Authorship; and Unit IV: Composing with Web and Portfolio

Exhibit. And, the major texts for the course included Barry Hempe's *Making Documentary Films and Videos: A Practical Guide to Planning, Filming, and Editing Documentaries;* Richard Beach, Chris M. Anson, et al.'s *Understanding and Creating Digital Texts: An Activity-Based Approach;* Anthony Williams' *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* ; Cynthia L. Selfe's article: "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing;" and National Writing Project, Danielle Devoss et al.'s *Because Digital Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Online and Multimedia Environment.* The course also had multiple print and online articles, and other texts (videos, documentaries, websites, audios, images etc.) in digital forms posted on the course site.

Student Response to the Implementation of the Course

This is my fifth semester teaching this course. This course attracts students from across campus with differing levels of digital composition proficiency. In this section, I examine a case study of one student from Spring of 2017: Edward Ruano, a Cinema and Television Arts major, tracing his journey and learning experience through this course. In his final reflection for the course, he writes:

> Over the last few months, I've learned a tremendous amount of practical and usable knowledge in the realm of digital technology, specifically in respect to digital writing, narrative, literacy and the production of digital texts (though the course curriculum is not limited to merely textual information). I've had the opportunity to delve in and fully immerse myself in these mediums not only by reading and attending lectures, but by actually doing and creating video, audio, written and other forms of creative digital media. Beginning with a self-reflective digital literacy narrative, I've successfully completed an audio movie review, a documentary film, a Wikipedia article, a Wordpress blog containing a digital portfolio and a short animated film throughout the semester. These are skills that I know will be valuable to me here at CSUN and in my future as a public relations professional.

For the first assignment, students were asked to compose their own digital literacy narrative, focusing on the process of acquiring their present level of digital literacy, the challenges and successes they have encountered with technology, and the individuals, institutions, organizations, or communities (both real and virtual) that helped and hindered them along their journey. They

were asked to produce a 5-7 minutes long audio/video beginning with scripting their narratives first and then video or audio recording those narratives.

Edward decided to discuss his upbringing and how computers and the internet affected his life in his literacy narrative. About this experience, Edward says this in his final course reflection: "Not only was this my first introduction to SoundCloud, but the project introduced me to audio production in general. It was fun experimenting with different software like GarageBand and Audacity. I learned how to properly write for broadcast, record myself speaking clearly and adjust the different sound levels and audio tracks to produce something that was easy on the ears."

Following the literacy narrative, first major project for the course was to compose a short (5 minutes) audio review of a contemporary movie of student's choosing using GarageBand in the style of radio programs in *NPR.* In the review, they were asked to make creative use of sound effects, music, silence, and any other audio tools at their disposal to communicate their ideas. They had to target their review to an educated audience beyond campus and the review needed to be written in a style that could translate well into speech, a written piece adjusted into something more "talky"—a vocal performance. It should also have to display originality and technical execution, and mix together at least three audio tracks (background music, their voice over/narrative, clips of dialogues from the movie, or director/producer or cast member's interviews/commentary on the movie, etc.). They were asked to export their reviews in mp3 format, upload them in SoundCloud, and then embed them in their own digital portfolios.

Edward had this to say about his learning experience through audio movie review project he did for the course:

> For my audio movie review, I chose to critique *La La Land*. After gathering a variety of library and internet research including interviews with the cast and crew, notetaking during multiple viewings of the film, song interpretation and lyrical analysis, I utilized various transitions and music from *La La Land* throughout to enhance my narrative, as well effective sources and audio interview clips. By learning how to properly adjust sound between different audio tracks to compose a coherent audio review, I feel confident that I can finally create a podcast—something that I've always wanted to do but never felt I had the adequate experience. Thankfully, I do now. (Edward Ruano's final course reflection).

Moving forward, the next major project for the course was producing a ten-minute-long mini documentary collaboratively in a small group of 3

students. Students could choose any contemporary or historical topics for this project. The documentary, however, should have to incorporate a good amount and variety of sources—alphabetic texts (books, articles, newspaper editorials etc.), audios, videos, still images, interviews, animations and visual resources, among others— and be organically composed. It should also demonstrate their knowledge or learning of a number of techniques such as handling video camera, still camera, interviewing people, conducting field research, incorporating voice over into the film and/or editing skills. The juxtaposition of different texts and narrative voice and their organic unity would be the key evaluation criteria for their video project. The project should also reflect their understanding of audience, textual cohesion, and ethical treatment of sources, etc.

As part of the process, students needed to write a proposal, then script for the documentary before putting everything together in iMovie or other movie making programs. They also needed to secure permissions and give credit for all the materials used in their projects. Below, Edward describes his experience working on the documentary project:

> Next, with some help from others in the class, I constructed a documentary film about anime—a subject I had no prior knowledge of. This was perhaps the most difficult, yet most rewarding, project for me. My portion dealt with a brief introduction of the genre to establish a clear tone, purpose and pacing of the film before delving into the history of anime, including its early beginnings in the early 20th century through to its contemporary usage. I learned a lot about film production, including audio and video editing using multiple tracks, transitions, backgrounds music, titles, digital effects, pacing, slideshows, cropping, etc. using various mediums like QuickTime, iMovie and Lightworks. (Edward Ruano's final course reflection)

In fact, their documentary film was excellently composed. They had collected and used a rich set of primary and secondary sources, including first-hand interviews and available stock videos from the web. Editing was meticulously done and the voice-over sustained narrative, informed by credible data from varied sources.

The third major project for the course was collaboratively composing a featured length Wikipedia article. Students were advised to choose an underdeveloped or completely non-existent article to work with for this assignment. "Stub" articles were highlighted as the ideal candidates for development. The final product had to be a Wikipedia article of ~3000 new words. The use of

at least two images as well as other relevant media was required. This paper or revision must adhere to Wikipedia's position on neutral point of view and should contain references/citations whenever relevant.

As such, Edward completed his own Wikipedia page on 6th episode of the 4th season of his favorite television show, *Parks and Recreation*. He says that "the formatting and guidelines were a big learning curve for me, but I feel accomplished knowing that I contributed to something significant and larger than myself. Though my article is still in review, I believe I should have no problem getting it published since I was careful in citing my sources as well as using other episode articles for reference" (Edward Ruano's final course reflection).

Apart from these major projects, students were required to respond to the course readings through blog posts throughout the semester. They wrote a short response to the shared reading(s) and post the responses to their portfolios. Student responses showed their familiarity with the assigned readings and demonstrated their engagement with them either by drawing connections between the readings (and course themes), and/or by thoughtfully reflecting on the implications of the readings and discussions. Each post had to be between 400 and 600 words and would be due before class each week. Their blog post examined one or more of these issues:

- Main issues, themes, or questions/claims in the reading
- Language use in the select texts
- Key texts cited (and intertextual relationships)
- Major questions/challenges the text posed for them
- Issues/questions from seminar discussions and texts under consideration

The class ended with a digital portfolio exhibition. The final portfolios would showcase student works across the course. In addition to all the projects they had produced earlier in the semester, I also asked them to add something new. They could choose to revise and improve two earlier pieces or compose a new piece. For the new piece, they could choose from 1) a set of 5 new blog posts with a critical introduction on digital writing topics; or 2) a new 60 second video on a topic of their choice that is relevant to a wider audience.

As Edward's portfolio demonstrates, he produced a new 60 second video as a new addition to his final portfolio. He describes his final 60 second video production experience this way:

> The short animation sequence was my last project. I was happy that this project was open-ended, since I've been meaning to create a video for an up-and-coming guided med-

itation app I'm creating with my friends. This was a lot of fun to make, and I feel that my previous experience gained throughout the course served as a launch pad to make this and other digital media well into the future. (Edward Ruano's final course reflection)

Edward's finished projects, including his final portfolio, and his course reflection demonstrate that he had a positive learning experience on this course. As was the objective of the course, he was able to use a variety of digital tools and programs to produce an array of digital texts. In other words, he could practice writing in an expanded sense—the idea that writing includes print, but also multimodal compositions done by using mediums, such as sound, video, images, web, graphics, and animation. Even though some students had to navigate a steep learning curve initially, similar to how Edward encountered, their finished products exhibited their learning of many theoretical and pragmatic insights about digital composing, including rhetoricity of different media, ethical treatment of sources, and productive team works.

Conclusion

To conclude, this whole process of curriculum design and seeking approvals through multiple curriculum review committees on campus—beginning with Composition Committee and Curriculum Committee in the English Department; Academic Council in the College of Humanities; and Educational Policies Committee in the university—revealed how tenuous the disciplinary borders are and how challenging the task of drawing territorial boundaries is in the academic world. While it was no doubt an arduous task, I argue that our disciplinary identity and prestige in the academic world rest in our ability to successfully articulate what's special about what we do and how what we do benefits a larger academic community, including students like Edward. So, one effective step towards consolidating our disciplinary prestige would be to propose our minor and major courses as GE courses like any other science, maths or economics courses, and teach them to a larger student population beyond our immediate and cognate academic units. My digital writing course as GE is already being used by English major, writing and rhetoric minor, popular culture minor, and the minor in digital humanities.

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