Using Facebook to Teach Rhetorical Analysis

Jane Mathison Fife

The attraction of Facebook is a puzzle to many people over the age of thirty-five, and that includes most college faculty. Yet students confess to spending significant amounts of time on Facebook, sometimes hours a day. If you teach in a computer classroom, you have probably observed students using Facebook when you walk in the room. Literacy practices that fall outside the realm of traditional academic writing, like Facebook, can easily be seen as a threat to print literacy by teachers, especially when they sneak into the classroom uninvited as students check their Facebook profiles instead of participating in class discussions and activities. This common reaction reflects James King and David O'Brien's (2002: 42) characterization of the dichotomy teachers often perceive between school and nonschool literacy activities (although they are not referring to Facebook specifically): "From teachers' perspectives, all of these presumably pleasurable experiences with multimedia detract from students' engagement with their real work. Within the classroom economy technology work is time off task; it is classified as a sort of leisure recreational activity." This dichotomy can be broken down, though; students' enthusiasm for and immersion in these nonacademic literacies can be used to complement their learning of critical inquiry and traditional academic concepts like rhetorical analysis. Although they read these texts daily, they are often unaware of the sophisticated rhetorical analysis they employ while browsing others' profiles (or as they decide what to add to or delete from their own page). Engaging students in a rhetorical analysis of Facebook can take advantage of this high-interest area—where most students are already rhetorically savvy but unaware of their critical processes—to teach the often challenging skill of rhetorical analysis.

Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture
Volume 10, Number 3 © 2010 by Duke University Press

Effectively Framing Facebook for Critique

It can be tricky to bring Facebook or any other popular literacy into the classroom as an object of critique without seeming to frame it as a lowbrow object of intellectual contempt. When critique is focused on popular culture in the classroom, Frank Farmer (1998: 204) has noted "the perception among students that cultural critique is a privileged, elitist mode of inquiry, one that is largely indifferent to, if not contemptuous of, those it presumably seeks to enlighten or liberate." Since sites like Facebook and MySpace are frequently cast as dangerous technologies in the media, students often expect a similarly negative stance when social networking sites are discussed in the classroom. I explain to my class that our goal is not to evaluate Facebook as a good or bad communication tool but to look at the rhetorical strategies that inform how people use Facebook to communicate with others.

When we begin discussing Facebook, many students see it as a transparent tool and not likely to be interesting. But as we dig more deeply into how people use Facebook by reading some recent essays, students are less willing to take Facebook at "face value." Some critiques pique their interest more than others. Christine Rosen (2007) argues that Facebook is more about creating status by amassing large numbers of friends than about connecting with genuine friends. My students did acknowledge that while some people use Facebook this way, most of the users they know are more selective about whom they friend. Many students were quick to respond to the complaint expressed by Brent Schendler (2007) that he just did not "get" Facebook with comments along these lines: *These articles were written by older adults so they don't really understand*. While some students dismissed all the articles as the opinions of out-of-touch old folks, others focused on insights that struck them as accurate descriptions of Facebook's functions. They endorsed Joel Stein's characterization of Facebook as a "platform for self-branding" (2007). And after Schendler (2007: 66) expresses his inability to "get" Facebook, he describes how his twenty-something daughters explain why it is useful to them: as an "antidote to homesickness" because it helps "preserve that special intimacy that comes only from knowing every twist and turn in the lives of her best friends" and as a "tool for procrastination." My students agreed that these uses were important for them as well. Once we shifted the inquiry from observations by oldsters who did not understand to observations that resonated with their Facebook experiences, students were ready for deeper analysis.

Modifying the Tools of Rhetorical Analysis to Fit Facebook

One student expressed skepticism about the very possibility of analyzing Facebook profiles rhetorically because he said he had Googled an essay about Facebook and rhetorical analysis, and it claimed that traditional rhetorical analysis techniques did not apply to Facebook. I told him I agreed that Facebook profiles were indeed very different kinds of texts from traditional essays, and that was exactly why we were about to spend a class meeting looking at how features in Facebook profiles communicated to readers. Jamerson Magwood (n.d.), the author of the essay my student read, maintains that traditional facets of rhetorical analysis (he chiefly mentions ethos, pathos, logos, and the canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery) do not work when applied to Facebook profiles because "there is no argument." Magwood writes that profiles are not arguments: "Each account is an individual representation of someone else's view, but not an affirmed point on a given argument. The accounts do not really establish a thesis or intend to prove a point, which does not work with traditional rhetorical standards." He also suggests that the lack of transitions is a problem in analyzing arrangement, while the template nature of the documents makes it hard to analyze style because the profiles all look similar.

My students and I addressed Magwood's critiques as we talked about Aristotle's concepts of logos, ethos, and pathos and how we could find these appeals within the features of Facebook profiles. A much more recent text than Aristotle's helped my students see how nontraditional collage-like texts could still employ rhetorical tactics to get their messages to an audience: Rebekah Nathan's *My Freshman Year* (2005). Nathan, an anthropology professor, wrote this monograph after a year of participant observation in her own university (which she calls Any U) when she enrolled as a freshman, submitting only her high school transcript without mentioning her subsequent graduate work. She lived in the dorms and went to classes, posing as a returning student, in order to find out more about college life than she was able to do as a professor observing classroom interactions. I read to the class the section of Nathan's chapter (23–27) on dorm life in which she analyzes dorm doors to discover the tacit rules that govern their design/production. I asked them to consider how much they think Nathan's analysis applies to the doors they have seen and how it is applicable to a reading of Facebook profiles. Nathan's description (verbal only, no pictures included) of dorm doors and the codes they reveal for what goes on and what is left off is a very helpful and accessible introduction to rhetorical analysis of a text that is highly visual

and collage based and is limited in its print content, and in that print content favors borrowed quotations and witticisms over lengthy discussions and explanations. Nathan also describes a rhetoric of exaggeration and extremism (well understood by students), supporting the general idea of fun and spontaneity. Much of this rhetoric of door composition applies to Facebook profiles. The rhetorical goals of identity disclosure and a bit of exhibitionism parallel the Facebook textual dynamic nicely. Even the writing of personal messages on the "wall" in Facebook is like the message boards most people put on their doors. As with dorm doors, students can readily claim that the representation of self on Facebook pages is often exaggerated and tongue in cheek.

We talked about how traditional rhetorical concepts like logos, ethos, and pathos shift when applied to new media texts. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knoble (2007: 9) argue that "new literacies involve different '*ethos* stuff' from that which is typically associated with conventional literacies" because "new literacies are more 'participatory,' 'collaborative,' and 'distributed' in nature than conventional literacies." In terms of Facebook, this collaborative quality would include comments written on a person's wall or applications (like pokes, zombie bites, or Harry Potter spells) sent to a person. By the end of that day's meeting we had pulled together a fairly extensive list of Facebook features that students thought were rhetorically significant. These features included quantity and type of pictures (in profiles and albums), people's comments on walls, applications (what and how many), the "about me" and "personal info" sections (how much and tone), standard profile information, and groups. Students observed that even apparently small features like the status (a statement of what the person is doing or feeling: "John is" and a blank to fill in) can offer telling information about the person's attempts to affect an audience. Silly or "random" statements might make the person appear clever or witty, while a straightforward statement like "Becky is lonely" could prompt an invitation from a dorm neighbor to come and hang out. Since Facebook profiles are representations of the self, most features that can be seen as appeals to logos or pathos also have a strong reflection on the writer's ethos. Even comments written by someone else on one's wall gain a tacit endorsement by the profile owner if they are left instead of deleted.

Critical Insights from Rhetorical Readings of Facebook

My students, many of whom had initially said that Facebook was not very interesting to analyze because it is just a straightforward communication tool, had different responses once they began their projects. Learning from my students' insights has complicated the way I look at Facebook.

Motifs of Partying Are Not Fabricated But Are Not Representative

One phenomenon that interests students is how students' interpretive frame for reading Facebook pages is very different from parents' perspectives. Parents do not understand the trope of exaggeration, almost a parody of the "wild" college life that is at work on many Facebook pages. Students note that when they see a few pictures of drinking, they know that they are generally not representative of someone's life. In other words, these images should not be seen primarily as factual appeals to the intellect. While the photos are real, I assume, partying images are carefully selected moments from a person's experience that trump the more usual boring stuff; descriptions and pictures of more common activities like studying just do not make the cut for most folks. These pictures alone are not intended as a claim that partying is the main activity in these students' lives, as might appear to be the case when read through a parental lens looking for logos, for straight factual representation. When read as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the college party culture, they are partly an appeal to pathos through humor and an invocation of fun-filled, lighthearted values. In contrast, profiles that go beyond this display of a few casual party pictures can depict the writer as a person obsessed with partying or a person trying desperately to seem cool by looking the part of the partier. Instead of just a few party pictures in an album, these cases might include a profile picture of the writer holding a drink along with many other photos of carousing. Similarly, statements about drinking in the person's profile along with conversations on the wall about parties past and future can suggest a person trying very hard to be popular by crafting an image of a party guy or girl.

"Please Like Me" versus "This Is Me"

Students observed that very general responses to items in the "about me" section (for example, someone claiming to like "all types" of music) suggested that the person was trying to be more likeable, to appeal to greater numbers of people instead of revealing specific likes or dislikes that might turn off some readers. They noted that people using what I call the "please like me" rhetorical strategy often included quotations from popular songs or movies on their profiles, attempting to stir positive emotions in the reader by citing commonly liked elements of pop culture. The reader could respond with a positive judgment about the profile writer's ethos when these quotations hit the target on their appeals to pathos. In contrast to the "like me" strategy, some profiles could be said to have a "this is me" approach, describing distinctive tastes in music, listing specific (often less popular) bands and quotations from favorite

books or friends instead of tag lines from cult films. These writers veered away from the pathos-heavy appeals to affiliation, using a more logos-driven cataloging of likes to distinguish the writer from others, creating a greater sense of accuracy in the presentation of self. For some students, these specific "this is me" profiles — even though they may not have evoked positive feelings through shared preferences — impressed them favorably through the honest ethos they created instead of the ethos of schmoozing suggested by the "like me" profiles.

Dependency on Electronic Interaction

While my class was studying Facebook, some server malfunction made it impossible for our campus to access Facebook for an evening. This outage made many students notice the difficulty they had functioning without it. Several students realized how much of their time spent surfing (often avoiding doing schoolwork) was spent on Facebook. My students' experiences were echoed by a commentary published in our school paper describing the difficulties the writer noted during this involuntary Facebook hiatus. In this commentary, David Harten (2007) observed that it "gave us all an interesting perspective into what life might be like if there wasn't such a great social-networking Web site to access that can assist some people in completely avoiding having a social life all together." Partly a result of this event, several of my students focused their rhetorical analyses on profile features that might suggest whether someone overuses the site. They noted that features suggesting an overreliance on Facebook might include an excessive number of "friends," many albums of photos, and updates to a person's status and profile information many times a day. In cases like this, the nearly constant additions to the profile resulted in a reader's "get a life" judgment on the writer's ethos.

Digital Autobiographies, Journals, and Memorials

One of my students remarked that Facebook profiles can share extensive information about a person and that for some people it may be the closest they come to writing an autobiography. These constantly changing records can log social activities and encounters of the very active as well as journal-like meditations of more reflective students. The pages of autobiographical information — which, according to my students, are often very accurate reflections of a person's ethos — can be used by the curious to extensively investigate a person by electronically befriending them before deciding whether to invest time in a face-to-face friendship. Some students confessed that they

sometimes befriended a friend of a friend just because they were nosy and wanted to find out more about the person, not because they wanted to pursue a genuine friendship.

These profiles that usually reflect the ephemeral concerns of the writer can take on special significance upon the writer's death. Following the recent (unrelated) deaths of several students at my university, their Facebook pages became impromptu memorials as friends added pictures and reminiscences. In cases like these, brief comment exchanges on the wall with friends that occurred before the person's death may lose their logos-driven informative value and become poignant testimonies to the ethos of the deceased—how she was always there for her friends, for example, or managed to find time in her busy schedule to plan service events.

Learning with Our Students

Studying Facebook helps students draw on the tacit skills of rhetorical analysis that they already use to make explicit their awareness of rhetorical concepts. In addition, it helps them to develop a more critical stance toward a popular literacy they encounter regularly and to appreciate its complexity. This assignment has the added benefit of teaching teachers about an important literacy practice of college students that can easily be written off as a waste of time by those outside the social network. Margaret Hagood, Lisa Patel Stevens, and David Reinking (2002: 69) suggest that "the literacies that are embedded in the lives of today's Millennial Generation are substantively and culturally unique. And we argue that they need to be better understood to comprehend and to influence positively literacy development in contemporary society." Even if we do not want to be Facebook users ourselves, as teachers of language we need to keep up with changing digital literacies.

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DOI 10.1215/15314200-2010-007

Page and Screen

Teaching Ethnic Literature with Film

David S. Goldstein

We teachers of multiethnic American literature face a common dilemma: How do we show students, especially in predominantly white classes, the richness and complexity of ethnic American literature without marginalizing it as somehow peripheral to American literature? Having taught my junior-level American Ethnic Literatures course for the fourth time, I have found it useful to incorporate feature and nonfiction films with our texts to reconcile my dual goals: showcasing exemplary literature by American writers of color and making a case for ethnic literature as integral — not peripheral — to American literary history. I pair each of the four novels that we read with a film that intentionally complicates students' preconceptions about ethnic communities, allowing them to explore supposed "universal" themes but also to recognize differences *within* ethnic groups, not just between them. This leads to eye-opening considerations of American history and cultures, issues of canon

formation and exclusion, and individual prejudices—in all, a contributor to a liberal education in the best sense.

I teach at a small, predominantly white campus in the suburbs of a large city. Most of our students are returning to higher education after a hiatus—often a decade or more—and all are commuters. These features of the student body tend to result in a relatively limited worldview, for many of them have been exposed to few persons of color or ways of life other than their own. Moreover, because I teach in an interdisciplinary program and not in an English department, I cannot rely on a common set of literary analysis skills. By augmenting literary texts with cinematic ones, I have found ways to open students' minds without unwittingly leading them into traps of oversimplification.

The intentional upsetting of preconceptions begins the first day, when I tell students that I regret being asked to teach a course on ethnic American literature. I explain that such a course title, especially in a course catalogue that offers courses called Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Twentieth-Century American Literature, implies that ethnic American literature resides outside American literature, which of course is untrue. I note that, in fact, American literature cannot be understood without understanding the literary contributions of writers of color, just as Toni Morrison points out the folly of an American history without consideration of African American experiences.

To avoid the perennial problem of using ethnic texts as sociological documents or as "spokestexts" for entire ethnic groups, I select the texts and center the discussions around the theme of "community," borrowing from Bonnie TuSmith's book, *All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures* (1993). TuSmith argues that the experiences of many American ethnic groups run counter to the cult of the individual, often seen as the core trope in American literary history. From the beginning of the course, then, students encounter the notion that the American individualism they likely have taken for granted is not the only generative metaphor in American literature. TuSmith also introduces students to the complexity of experiences between and within ethnic groups. Each of the four novels that we read addresses community, but they do so in markedly different ways. The course therefore bears some cohesion, but it also resists students' overgeneralizations and oversimplifications. The films that I use further complicate their understandings, just as the films augment their comprehension of textual themes, structures, and aesthetics.

I begin the course with Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" (1983), in which one of the two protagonists is black and the other is white. Morrison withholds which is which, however. Instead, she plants seemingly contradictory clues throughout the short story, which readers — at least most American readers — interpret according to their own preconceptions. In class discussions, this story brilliantly turns students inward, as they must explore how they filled in missing information to arrive at their own conjecture regarding the characters' racial identities. For example, students who grew up in African American neighborhoods are more likely to guess that the character who drinks milk is white because they are more likely to know that descendants of northern Europe tolerate lactose better than most persons of color. Students also base their conjectures on characters' behavior. Typically, European American students cite the heavy cross that one character's mother wears around her neck as a sign that she is African American, but African American students usually make the opposite guess, even citing the same clue. The exercise shows students that their preconceptions help them fill in the story's gaps. By shaking their faith that they are free of prejudices, the story opens their minds to historical, social, and cultural contexts of literature and sensitizes their readings of the novels that follow.

We then discuss our first novel, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1993). Drawing heavily upon myth and what Western readers call "magic," Erdrich's unconventional novel features multiple first-person narrators whose versions of events complicate, enrich, and sometimes even contradict one another, like Kurosawa's great film, *Rashomon*. I pair this novel with the feature film *Smoke Signals* (1998), written for the screen by the Coeur d'Alene Indian Sherman Alexie, based on two stories from his collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1994). Like Erdrich's novel, Alexie's screenplay freely mixes myth and "reality," refusing to privilege one over the other. This helps me make the point that the dichotomy of myth and real, or of dream and real, is a peculiarly Western notion not always shared by members of subcultures. From that point, we can discuss aesthetic judgments and the need for assessing literature on criteria that make sense for traditions not exclusively European in origin. Both texts — Erdrich's novel and the film *Smoke Signals* (1998) — also bear the crucial theme of the power of storytelling. Students begin to see that events and facts do not matter as much as what we tell ourselves about those events and facts. History, after all, is not the past but our *stories* about the past, which is why interpretations are infinite in number. Stories affect real people in genuine, material ways. They matter.

We then read John Edgar Wideman's novel *Sent for You Yesterday*

(1997), part of his Homewood trilogy. With its uncommon and (to most students) nebulous structure, the novel patterns itself on the blues. I show a documentary about the evolution of the blues as the form traveled in the Great Migration from the rural American South to the urban American North, a theme that links the novel's story to the beautiful feature film with which I also pair the novel, Tim Reid's *Once upon a Time . . . When We Were Colored* (1995), based on the memoir by Clifton Taulbert. Because the film takes place in Taulbert's native Mississippi but features characters who go north for work and for dignity, we have a context for understanding the disappointment, but also the love of music, expressed by Wideman's characters in their community on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. Reid's film demonstrates to students that African American experiences vary widely, depending on time period, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and so forth. Realizing that there is no monolithic "African American culture," the students are better prepared to appreciate the specificity of the experience about which Wideman writes, while recognizing that links — including the blues — do exist from one region to another and one time period to another.

By the time we read Sandra Cisneros's deceptively simple novel *The House on Mango Street* (1991), I am ready to unsettle students one more time by suggesting that some of the experiences of the protagonist, an adolescent girl named Esperanza, derive from her urban surroundings, not only from her Mexican American heritage, as students often are quick to assume. I show the poignant documentary *Girls Like Us* (1997), about four girls of different ethnic backgrounds who live in South Philadelphia and come of age during the four years the filmmakers follow them. The same issues of gender and sexuality that confuse and challenge the girls in the film also arise for Esperanza. For example, one of the girls in the film, the daughter of Vietnamese immigrant parents, talks about bilingual and bicultural strains not unlike Esperanza's. Cisneros's protagonist describes experiences that are certainly influenced by — not determined by — her Mexican heritage, but they are also shaped by multiple factors unrelated to or indirectly related to her ethnicity.

Finally, we conclude with Gish Jen's comic novel *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), in which the title character comes of age in the 1960s along with America itself. Born to immigrant parents from China, Mona converts to Judaism (she toys with changing her name from Chang to Changowitz) amid her wonderfully multicultural friends and acquaintances. Mona, and the novel itself, undermine what my students thought they knew about race and ethnicity. I preface it with the fine documentary *Separate Lives, Broken Dreams* (1994), which tells, in stirring first-person accounts, about the Chi-

nese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its continuing legacy for Chinese American families fifty years after its repeal. The film introduces students to the dreams and aspirations of Chinese immigrants and the unimaginable hardships they faced on Angel Island and, if they were lucky enough to pass interrogation, the obstacles they struggled to overcome once they landed on the mainland. So when we see the often funny but also touching efforts of Mona's parents to make a better life for their daughters by establishing a successful restaurant—chicken, not pot stickers!—students finish the course thinking about the American Dream in all its complexity: its allure and hopefulness in this multivoiced nation, but also its variability and its elusiveness to certain Americans. The documentary suggests to students that Chinese American experiences are not the same as those of other Asian immigrant groups, nor have all Chinese Americans achieved the same level of socioeconomic success. The film and the novel thus synergistically resist overgeneralization and oversimplification.

We also step back from the literature to consider meta-issues of literary study and canon formation. To help contextualize the literature we read and to help students understand that ethnic American literature should be assessed in terms that make sense for its particular styles and modes, they also read selectively from important scholarly debates about the ethnic American literary canon. I have found articles by Harold H. Kolb Jr. ("Defining the Canon") and Paul Lauter ("The Literatures of America: A Comparative Discipline"), in LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr.'s edited volume *Redefining American Literary History* (1990), especially useful, as is John Lowe's (2000) insightful discussion of multicultural literature and its study as developing practices. Kolb and Lauter suggest alternative taxonomies of American literary works, contextualized in the previously unquestioned assumptions about aesthetic and cultural value that have generated an almost official American literary canon. Lowe usefully outlines approaches to ethnic American literature that expand students' ideas of how literature should be analyzed and assessed.

By placing these feature and nonfiction films into dialogue with the texts that we cover, our course leads students to a richer, more complex understanding of the American nation and its peoples. Despite the danger of offering a course called American Ethnic Literatures, which unfortunately suggests that those traditions are peripheral to "real" American literature, the integration of cinematic and literary texts allows for a multiplicity of voices that are true to the tensions in contemporary America. I tell my students on the first day that they will end the course more uncertain about their nation

and their world—even themselves—than at the beginning of the course. Such is the nature of a liberal education.

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DOI 10.1215/15314200-2010-008

The H1N1 Virus and Video Production

New Media Composing in First-Year Composition

Michael Pennell

In fall 2009, many colleges and universities found themselves on the front lines of the battle against the H1N1 virus (more commonly known as swine flu). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Education targeted postsecondary institutions with flu information, policy recommendations, and communication materials such as the CDC's communication toolkit. At my northeastern land grant university, students and faculty were inundated with e-mails, Web sites, and fliers regarding the impact of H1N1 on campus. Ultimately a coordinating committee was established dedicated to monitoring the flu's impact on campus. Based on media reports and anecdotal stories, my campus's response mirrored other campuses throughout the country.

Such a large-scale event, connecting government agencies and local educators and students, provides a rich context for writing teachers looking to engage students in "real-world" projects. As Paula Mathieu (2005) outlines in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, writing classrooms and instructors are looking to the public as an exigence for writing activities. In addition, the handling of the H1N1 virus event illustrated the varied forms of media required to communicate with the public. From Web sites and e-mails to flyers and Twitter, the messages for prevention and action illustrated the multimodal composing practices many writing teachers stress to students. In what follows, I describe a project that students in a first-year honors writing course completed in the fall semester of 2009: creating a thirty- or sixty-second public service announcement (PSA) video about the spread and prevention of H1N1.

In the week before that semester began, I was finalizing plans for a first-year writing course offered through the honors program. While the honors course tends to mirror the general first-year writing course in goals and objectives, instructors tend to add a theme or focus. Such freedom encourages students to experiment with new activities and approaches. Within the flurry of pre-semester communications about H1N1's impact on campus, I received a flyer announcing a campus-wide student competition for the best H1N1 public service announcement (PSA). Entrants were asked to submit

a thirty- or sixty-second PSA on H1N1, including advice for students based on the latest information from health agencies. Cash prizes were offered, as well as the opportunity for broadcast of the winning PSA. Making some last-minute adjustments to the syllabus, I inserted this competition as the first project of the course.

While the digital turn in composition studies is by no means complete, it is safe to say that most writing classes, including teachers, students, and classrooms, show signs of this digital turn. Recent data from the Pew Research Center show that 93 percent of teens and young adults (aged 12–29) go online (Lenhart et al. 2010). A recent survey of composition curricula (Anderson et al. 2006: 69–70) indicates that the majority of individuals (71 percent) who included multimodal composition in their courses did so with the support of curricula committees. Moreover, 76 percent of respondents believed that nothing was being displaced by the move toward multimodal composing, describing the move as a "shift" or "alteration." Such a shift, however, does present writing instructors with new pedagogical concerns. In answering the question "Why teach digital writing?" the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) collective (2005) encourages a "large-scale shift in the rhetorical situations that we ask students to write within, the audiences we ask them to write for, the products that they produce, and the purposes of their writing." As I envisioned it, the H1N1 PSA competition would push students to meet WIDE's call not only technologically but also rhetorically. They would engage with a real audience and exigence while also utilizing digital technologies in production.

In the first week of class, I introduced the rhetorical situation: genre, medium, audience, purpose, and stance. Consistent across our first-year writing courses, the rhetorical situation is reinforced throughout the semester. This class, in particular, opted to use GMAPS as shorthand for the rhetorical situation's components. Despite its daunting task, the H1N1 PSA call for submissions was easily analyzed through these rhetorical variables, such as audience and purpose. We discussed, for example, the differences in an H1N1 PSA targeting college students versus one targeting the elderly. Students also explored the secondary audience for the PSA—a panel of health and film experts. This element of multiple audiences complicated matters as students debated how to reach college students with a message that health professionals would support. During our discussion of genre, we explored the seeming straightforwardness of PSAs. As a class, we viewed a variety of PSAs and noted their common traits, such as use of emotion, humor, celebrity spokespersons, or short taglines. Such analysis, while done in many writing classes, was the beginning in this case,

rather than the end. Students knew that our analysis would provide important groundwork for the production of their PSAs.

Eventually the students formed five groups to brainstorm and begin the production of their PSAs. Because we are at a university with limited technology resources, we scraped together the equipment to shoot, capture, and edit their PSAs. Students relied on a variety of devices and applications to capture, edit, and produce their PSAs. They expressed frustration at equipment limitations, time constraints, and group member involvement. Such concerns tend to plague group work in most classes as students practice with collaboration. Regardless, each of the groups did create a PSA, and after the PSA DVDs were due to the dean's office, we had a showing of the final products. Each group introduced its PSA, and we watched it twice and sometimes three times on a screen in front of the entire class.

While the digital turn in writing looks different on each campus and in each classroom, digital video production may prove to be a turn that more writing instructors make. Jenny Edbauer Rice (2008: 377) positions such "expanding means of production [as] key to expanded rhetorical engagement." Even further, Jennifer Sheppard (2009: 129) positions writing instructors as obligated to "help students develop rhetorical competencies, particularly with new media." She counters the skills aspect of such composing by noting the strong connection between the "choices" and "consequences" writers engage in as they produce compositions like PSAs (130). In comparing the digital video production of PSAs on addictive diseases to a traditional written assignment, Heather Ross (2003) maintains, "The digital video project succeeds in addressing each of the goals with at least as much and often greater effectiveness than a traditional written assignment." While I am uncomfortable comparing multimedia texts with traditional written texts, I do agree with Jason Ranker's (2008: 230) findings from a study of fifth graders using video production: "Students who work in similar multimedia writing environments may find new, motivating, self-guiding purposes for writing as afforded within the whole activity of producing a multimedia, digital video text." Clearly, more instructors are not only experiencing and introducing the digital turn into their writing classes and activities, but they are looking to digital video production specifically as a way to expand production in the composition course.

Initially many of my students expressed concern when asked to compose a video PSA for their first-year writing course. This concern related to the production of such a project—many of them indicated a lack of technical expertise or appropriate equipment. This concern also captured a disconnect

between their expectations of a first-year writing course (traditional papers) and their reality (a PSA video). A third concern I detected was the "real-world" aspect of the project. The competition provided a real audience, cash prizes, and a pressing social issue (H1N1). For some, the prospect of actually dropping off the completed video at the dean's office was a major hurdle. However, the two to three weeks this project lasted provided some of the most fruitful discussions of the rhetorical situation, persuasive appeals, and drafting that I had witnessed in first-year writing. Despite last-minute technical difficulties, all groups entered the competition and completed the PSAs. During the viewing session I sensed pride and accomplishment that are too often missing from my experiences teaching first-year writing. Students chuckled at warnings, such as "Don't be that guy!" when a sick student doesn't stay in bed and infects others throughout his day. Or they hummed along to the "Swine flu song" as the actors washed their hands on screen. They also learned some useful advice as one PSA asked them to "Spread the word, not the flu."

But more than a sense of pride and completion, this project reflected others' views on digital video production and its potential for writing courses. Melissa Meeks and Alex Ilyasova (2003) contend that digital video production

> is a powerful way to engage many literacies at once; stimulates collaboration and participation; involves students in a rich composition process; puts students in a variety of social spaces; and takes a village.

It seems to me, even after attempting digital video production with a first-year writing course, that these qualities are not unique to such production. A project and course involving real-world examples (especially centered on problem-based learning) also have this potential. However, I must admit that digital video production—especially when it involves an outside exigence, such as the H1N1 PSA competition—requires students to relate the rhetorical situation to production in the context of a clear purpose and audience. In other words, the technology is a part of the rhetorical situation—students must contend with it in the planning and production stages of the process. As Rice (2008: 378) admits, such a challenge asks students to "imagine what can be done with these tools." And this combines "knowing how to imagine rhetorically and knowing how to use the equipment"; it makes the technology, the production, a part of invention as students compose, not an add-on after determining the product.

While I could end this narrative by lamenting the fact that none of my students' PSAs placed in the top three of the competition, I'll instead reflect on

the implications for digital video production in my first-year writing pedagogy and in our curriculum. As Cynthia Selfe (2004: 54) contends, composition studies risks becoming "increasingly irrelevant" if we are unwilling to envision "composing beyond conventional bounds of the alphabetic." However, this movement beyond the conventional requires a contextual awareness, in the words of Danielle DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey Grabill (2005: 37), of "the complex interrelationships of material, technical, discursive, institutional, and cultural systems." As the authors illustrate, an infrastructural awareness is essential for composition teachers looking to new media composing; a lack of such awareness limits "what is possible for our students to write and learn." In composing video PSAs, the students and I quickly realized the layers and forces influencing this undertaking. Students could not secure cameras, editing software, or spaces within which to work together. They relied on personal computers, borrowed cameras, and limited editing software. Ultimately even transferring the videos to the required CDs for submission proved time consuming. Granted, technology issues arise in many pedagogical situations. However, such an exercise makes me question when we (composition teachers, departments, and campuses) have enough technology and support for new media composing. In other words, when is enough enough?

Beyond infrastructural limitations, I found the students combating their assumptions of writing and a writing class, especially one at the general education level. This layer compounded the infrastructural issues, leading them to defer to the potential film students' entries, which they believed—ultimately rightfully so—would be superior. (To view the winning PSA, "If Only We Could See," produced by a film major, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIq2XOp10wo.) And while our department and campus can invest in more resources for students, improving the material conditions for such work, it may prove more difficult to combat students' assumptions of what writing is. In this class, for example, students seemed more comfortable with the remaining projects, all of which looked more like the writing they may have expected when entering a college writing class. I offered the option of including the PSAs in their final portfolios. Unsurprisingly, none of them opted to revise the PSA; in turn, none were included in the portfolios. Combating those forces is, perhaps, curricular work—work that composition instructors and their departments can engage in over time (see Miles et al. 2008). Looking vertically, beyond first-year composition, we might see that the infrastructure of new media composing includes a curricular layer. This layer asks us to address when and where students experience new media composing in our curriculum as well as how that composing fits into the

larger learning outcomes on campus. And in this investigation, we might see a digital turn that is both technological and rhetorical.

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DOI 10.1215/15314200-2010-009