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Civic Engagement and New Media

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What does it mean to teach civic engagement in the 21st Century writing classroom? In our digital and networked and globalized world, college composition instructors need to redefine literacy in ways that reflect the actual communication practices we and our students engage in. To this end, many compositionists are now integrating multimodal projects (that is, “texts” composed with digital/new media technologies so as to include images, video, audio, and alphabetical writing) into their classroom designs. These multimodal projects provide new opportunities for students to communicate with and for a public audience outside the classroom, and to foster community connections and engagement. In Spring 2010, I taught my first multimodal civic engagement class, an upper division writing and rhetoric course that included a community-based experiential learning project in partnership with a campus organization. I hoped that a project using a variety of media, technologies and modalities with a purpose and audience beyond the classroom would foster in students a sense of connection to their campus and teach them that they can use composition, rhetoric, and design skills to participate in public conversations around issues that matter to them and their community.

At the 2009 TED Conference, Bennington College President Liz Coleman spoke about the connections between college education and the public good, and she called for a radical reinvention of liberal arts education to better serve that good. One of the big problems with liberal arts education today, Coleman argues, is that it valorizes the academic expert over the generalist – it pushes students to “jettison every



interest except one” and to become masters of a very narrow, niche area of study (Coleman). Liberal arts programs risk churning out graduates who have become virtuosos of the obscure and arcane. Rather, what liberal arts programs *should* be doing – *need* to be doing – is producing students who have the skills to be thoughtful, ethical, engaged citizens; colleges need to cultivate in students civic skills that are crucial to a healthy democracy.

While I teach at a Research 1 university and not a small liberal arts college (I am a non-tenure-track instructor), I think that Liz Coleman’s words apply to those of us who teach any subject situated within the liberal arts curriculum. I open the syllabus for my upper division writing class – WRTG 3020: Citizenship and Civic Engagement – with a quote from Coleman’s talk: “The problem is, there is no such thing as a viable democracy made up of experts, zealots, politicians, and spectators” (Coleman). The two words in that quote I want my students to pay special attention to, I tell them, are “experts” and “spectators.”

For the Spring 2010 semester, I did a complete overhaul of my 3020 class. I decided to revise my assignment sequence from exclusively text-based essays to a combination of text-based and multimodal projects (that is, “texts” composed in more than one mode or medium), placing strong emphasis on the multimodal. After learning about multimodal projects that fellow composition and rhetoric instructors included in their service-learning and civic engagement-themed classes, I was intrigued by the possibilities of those projects to provide students opportunities to communicate with and for a real audience outside the classroom, and to foster community connections and engagement. I developed a community-based experiential learning project in which my students could choose to compose posters, videos, and blogs, among other digital and visual options, with the purpose of persuading a public audience to take action around an event on campus. This was the first time I’d ever designed and taught a fully multimodal course.



Teaching a course with a big multimedia project at its core felt like a huge risk. I was leaving the safe and familiar grounds of teaching paper-based essay assignments and jumping into the great unknown of digital and visual communication. I'm a writer and a writing teacher. Multimodal composition is beyond my area of expertise. My technology skills are just above average – my visual design skills, nonexistent. I'm an avid consumer of new media, and am adept at creating simple blogs and wikis, but beyond that, I don't typically compose using new media technology. (Case in point: I'm writing this essay – an essay about a full-on multimodal class project – as text on the page, rather than composing it digitally, with an emphasis on visual design, which, really, would be more appropriate.) I had many worries about the feasibility of this class. Could I reasonably ask students to compose in media I'm not capable of composing in myself? Are posters and videos really appropriate projects in a writing class? Will students learn valuable civic and/or political engagement skills that they can transfer to other activities and projects beyond the class? Will students buy into this kind of work – and will they learn from it – or will they think the class is a joke?

Ultimately, though, I was convinced by the arguments made by many composition and rhetoric scholars that composition instructors need to integrate a variety of media, technologies and modalities into our writing classes in order for our classes to remain relevant and meaningful to students today. I was also intrigued by the possibilities of new media (and some traditional multimedia tools) to cultivate in students a “sense of involvement, investment, [and] responsibility with regard to some group or context” (Jacoby 8) that are some of the hallmarks of civic education.

Why Go Multimodal?

In recent semesters, as I reflected on what I teach in my classes and how it meets (or fails to meet) the needs of students, I asked myself these questions:



- What kinds of literacy practices should we be teaching in our writing classes?
- What is a “text”?
- What does it mean to teach civic engagement in the 21st Century writing classroom?

Literacy is, of course, culturally and historically situated. In the digital and networked and globalized world of the 21st Century, we need to redefine literacy in ways that reflect the actual communication practices we and our students engage in. Especially in a writing course about civic engagement, in which students are writing about and for a civic audience, it is crucial that students learn the critical, rhetorical, composition, and technology skills that allow them to communicate effectively in the world beyond the classroom – to become part of the broader public conversation. Rather than have students simply read *about* civic engagement and write academic analysis papers on those readings, in this class, I wanted students to create projects that actually *engage* a civic audience. As Cynthia Selfe and Pamela Takayoshi argue, “In an increasingly technological world, students need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading (consuming) texts employing multiple modalities, but also in composing in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successfully within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, and geopolitical borders” (“Thinking About Multimodality” 3).

Furthermore, multimodal composition offers so many opportunities for teaching rhetoric; it explodes the rhetorical possibilities for analyzing and composing beyond the limited options of text on paper. Multimodal compositions require their authors to make thoughtful, critical rhetorical choices about a wide range of available means of persuasion. Instead of only thinking about how to arrange words within the structure of alphabetic text on the page, students have to figure out first, what medium is best suited to deliver their message to their audience, and



then, within that medium, how to arrange words *and* image, color, sound, video ... any possible element that can be used to communicate visually, aurally, digitally. Anne Wysocki and Dennis Lynch, in the introduction to their textbook *Compose, Design, Advocate* (which I used as a text for my course), explain:

Design's approaches to creativity – in terms of both technique and media – can help writers expand from thinking about text-on-paper as their only possible product. Design's approaches can help writers think about different media for developing a multitude of possible responses to the contexts in which they are working and the audiences for whom they are composing, in order, finally, to design what is most effective and fitting, what can shape the best futures. (6)

In other words, by composing multimedia projects for an audience outside the classroom, students are no longer merely spectators of the civic process, but instead become active participants in it.

Setting Up the Project

In Spring 2010 I was ready to put theory into action. I set up my class as a problem-based learning experience. I wanted to present my students with a problem that could be resolved, or at least addressed, through written, visual, and/or digital communication. I wanted them to see that “communication not only means things but does things” (Wysocki, Lynch 10). Through work on a multimodal project, students would learn and put into practice skills that allow them to be active participants in and shapers of a public conversation – rhetorical skills, writing skills, and digital design and production skills.

I wanted to open the project to both new and traditional media options. By new media, I mean Web 2.0 tools – including blogs, videoblogs, wikis, social networking sites, and podcasting – that allow anyone with a computer and internet access to contribute to an online conversation.



Howard Rheingold refers to these tools as “participatory media,” and argues that “participatory media literacy is an active response to the as-yet-unsettled battles over political and economic power emerging in the mediasphere, and to the possibility that today’s young people could have a say in shaping the world they will live in – or might be locked out of that possibility” (100). Because traditional print media, too, make important contributions to these public conversations, I also wanted to include the option for students to design posters, brochures, postcards, yard signs, or any other print-based materials that they felt would be effective in communicating their message to their chosen audience.

I decided to set up the class project by partnering with a campus organization that I had a strong working relationship with, one that I knew had a need for the kind of media project my students could create. The Conference on World Affairs is ““a week-long extravaganza of discussion and debate”” that takes place on the CU-Boulder campus every April (Conference). The CWA is not an academic conference but is a free public forum run primarily by community volunteers and CU students. Every year, nearly 100 participants from a wide range of fields (media, science, technology, arts, environment, politics, business, medicine, human rights, among others) come to Boulder, for no pay, to share their knowledge, experience, and talents with an audience of about 90,000 attendees. The invited participants don’t come with prepared papers but instead meet in a roundtable format to talk, debate, and answer audience questions about topics in their fields. The result is a raw, accessible, exciting public dialog and free exchange of information and ideas.

Working with the conference in my class would open up opportunities for us to talk about different ways we access information, about the importance of an informed citizenry in a healthy democracy, about what counts as “expertise,” and about what kinds of “expertise” matter (and who determines what matters) in the social, political, and academic spheres. Personally, I love how the CWA redefines, reclaims and resituates “expertise.” Like Liz Coleman pointed out in her TED talk, academia too



often privileges a very limited kind of expertise – typically knowledge created and disseminated by people with PhDs, subjected to an academic peer-review process, and published in an academic forum; in other words, knowledge created within, by, and for the academy. While this kind of knowledge-creation is enormously important, of course, it has its limits: academic journals and conferences focus on a very specialized niche topic, and are only accessible to a select audience, typically others with advanced degrees in the field. The CWA, by contrast, is a much more democratic forum. It is broad in scope, and everybody can learn from it. Some of the CWA panelists have PhDs and work in academia, but many bring expertise from career and life experiences, and they share their knowledge in forums accessible to people from all kinds of backgrounds and with all levels of education.

As popular as the CWA is in Boulder and beyond, though, the majority of the 90,000 attendees every year are community members, not students. From my work with the conference in past years, I knew that the conference organizers were looking for new and innovative ways to increase student attendance at and participation in the conference, and they lacked the resources to get this message out themselves. I decided to make this my core class project: students would plan, compose, design, edit, and produce a comprehensive media campaign encouraging fellow students to attend the CWA. The authors of *Compose, Design, Advocate* define argument as “a piece of communication whose purpose is to direct and shape an audience’s attention in particular ways” (Wysocki, Lynch 18). In this project, students would be constructing arguments that would persuade fellow students to get involved in the CWA, a unique event important to both their campus and the broader Boulder community. My students would have a real audience for their work beyond the classroom; their final projects would be made public in time to reach students for the April 2010 conference, and they would learn whether their work made a difference (that is, increased student attendance at the CWA) by the end of the semester.



I did have some concerns, though, that this project was more marketing than civic engagement. The CWA campaign project wouldn't get students involved in work that directly affects political or social change. But I do think that the skills they would learn as they composed their projects (especially the rhetorical considerations about how to effectively communicate with a specific public audience through media, message, and design) *translate* well to other forms of civic communication. I would have to figure out how to help students make those connections, though, and help them reflect on how they might implement the lessons learned through this project in other civic or political situations.

Another concern I had about the campaign project is that I don't have the design and technology skills to help my students create sophisticated (especially visually sophisticated) multimedia pieces. But I knew that some students would come to class already with savvy design skills, and some with advanced media and technology experience. I hoped that students with those skills would teach and advise students without them (they did). And I also counted on the fact that many of my students, like so many digital natives, would be comfortable figuring out the technology on their own, given that they "learned how to learn new kinds of software before they started high school," and have a "willingness to learn new media by point-and-click exploration" (Rheingold 99). Still, I wanted to provide my students with the option for hands-on technology training and/or visual design guidance. I am lucky that at CU we have a resource called the Atlas Media Lab, a facility that serves faculty and students working on multimedia projects. I established a collaboration with the designers at the Media Lab, and they worked with my class all semester, giving students the opportunity to learn the technology and get feedback from design professionals to enable them to produce polished work suitable for a public audience.



Introducing Multimodal Composition to Students in a Civic Engagement Context

Before we launched into the big CWA media campaign, I introduced my students to basic elements of multimodal composition – and to the idea of using new media to create community – with a smaller project. Students wrote a 500-word This I Believe essay, modeled on the This I Believe radio series, which they recorded as an mp3 and posted to a wiki. In his book *Soul of a Citizen*, writer and activist Paul Rogat Loeb maintains that the personal story has the power to “provide the organic connection that binds one person to another” (119), a crucial element in building community. Telling our stories and reflecting on our lives, he says, can “help us connect with the stories of others, and with a larger narrative of being” (148). So, we began the semester by exploring personal beliefs and telling stories that inform those beliefs in a This I Believe audio essay.

With this project, we went from one mode (text) to two modes (text and single-track audio). For the last part of the assignment, on a wiki I had set up for the class, students created and designed their own web pages that included text, audio, and an image. A wiki is a web site that can be easily edited by users, allowing for “collaborative communities that can share knowledge and ideas with minimal technical know-how, so that any user can be a writer, editor, and content creator, and groups can harness collective intelligence to coauthor documents” (Rheingold 110). Through the This I Believe project, students learned how to use a wiki as a publication tool – as a tool to publish a final multimedia *product*. We would also use the wiki as part of the composing *process* as students developed and shared ideas for the CWA project (to view and hear these student essays, please go to <http://wrtg3020spring2010.wikispaces.com/>).



CWA Campaign Project

I began the CWA campaign project with an in-class freewrite. I posed the following questions:

- What events (lectures, entertainment, public meetings, etc) are taking place on campus in the next week or two or three? How do you know about these events?
- What messages stand out to you on campus? What makes you stop and pay attention?
- There's so much "noise" on campus and elsewhere. How does someone get their voice heard above the noise?

So, students began the project by thinking about audience, venue, media, and message. From there, they decided what medium they wanted to work in, and then, which subset of the student audience they would appeal to. As part of the brainstorming process, we conducted detailed rhetorical analyses of various kinds of multimedia compositions, allowing students to gain a deep understanding multimodal rhetorical strategies.

As students developed ideas for their projects, they posted them on the course wiki. Students explored their ideas in an informal, low-stakes setting, where they could share links to other media and images that inspired them. I shared the wiki with the CWA student volunteers, and they also responded to my students' ideas on the wiki. In this way, the wiki became a crucial tool for collaborative communication between my students, myself, and our community partner (To see the CWA campaign project wiki page, click here <<http://wrtg3020spring2010.wikispaces.com/CWA+Campaign+Project>>).

Students created a variety of media for this campaign, and they worked either individually, in pairs, or in small groups – their choice. One team of students chose to work with social media. They interviewed and profiled some of the participants who would be coming to campus, posted the interviews on the blog, and promoted the blog content, as well as other conference information, using Facebook and Twitter. Another team of



students opted to create a short video to inform students new to the CWA about how the conference could enhance their experience at CU; they intended to give this video to professors to show at the beginning of classes, post it on YouTube, and, in conjunction with the social media team, promote it using Facebook and Twitter.

The majority of students chose to work in print. Some created posters promoting the conference as a whole, but most chose to highlight specific panels or panelists that appealed to a sub-set of students (political science majors, for example, or pre-med students, or film majors). They not only designed their posters based on their understanding of that specific audience, but also chose where on campus to physically hang the posters. So, posters promoting political panels were hung in classroom buildings where political science classes are held; film-related posters went in arts buildings; etc. (My students were not responsible for putting posters on the walls; that job went to CWA volunteers.)

The video was the only project that never reached its audience; the filming and editing took way more time than the students expected, and they encountered a series of technical problems that they couldn't figure out and I couldn't help them with. The video didn't get finished in time for the conference. However, almost all of the posters were done on time, and were fantastic. I had a \$300 print budget from my department that allowed us to print out several hundred full-color 11X17 and 8X11 posters, which were hung in buildings all over campus before and during the conference week.

Successes, Failures and Lessons Learned

Overall, the campaign project was a success. I don't have any assessment data (assessing outcomes of a multimodal civic engagement project is something I could use help with), so my evaluation of the class is purely anecdotal. But based on student projects, their analyses of and reflections on their own work, and the many fascinating class discussions, I saw



evidence that students learned crucial rhetorical skills and processes for applying those skills in creating communication with a public purpose. And based on the CWA's response, the student work fulfilled its promise, and then some.

Students were more motivated and put in more time and effort on their work than I ever would have expected. I think the primary motivator for them was the fact that their work had a real audience and purpose outside the classroom. Students talked about this repeatedly as they developed their projects, and even more during conference week, once they saw their work posted on campus and on the CWA blog. They were definitely motivated by something besides just their grade: I told students that I would grade them on "proof of concept." I would assess their finished piece along with a rhetorical analysis of their work that explained their rhetorical choices, and assign a grade based on the quality of their ideas; they didn't have to produce artistic masterpieces to get an A. However, if they wanted their work to go public, they would have to produce pieces that met the approval of the CWA staff and volunteers; their work would have to be superior. Almost all students took the extra steps, by working on their own and with the Atlas Media Lab, to produce near-professional quality work. . They appreciated that they were using skills, strategies and technologies learned in class to make their voices heard outside the classroom. The conference is a big deal on campus, attracting large crowds and media attention; students were proud that they contributed to this celebrated community event.

None of the below posters are titled. All posters came from the spring 2010 WRTG 3020 class at the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder.

The End is Near



Beck , Hannity, Limbaugh, and O'Reilly: The Four Horses of the Apocalypse

The 2010 Conference of World Affairs

Thursday April 8, 2010 9:00-10:20am • Macky Auditorium

The END is NEAR and the four horsemen of the apocalypse have been identified: Glen Beck, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly. Could the conservative television and radio hosts that command the attention of millions of viewers be leading us to our doom?

Join panelists Robert Dreyfuss, Lou Dubose, Jim Emerson and Robert George for a discussion about the future of this country and the men leading us to our destiny at the 2010 Conference on World Affairs on April 8th at 9am in Macky Auditorium.

For more information about the conference go to: <http://www.colorado.edu/cwa/>



62ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON WORLD AFFAIRS

Fig. 1 Naqeeb, Razan, Poster, 2010 WRTG 3020 class, the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder.



ARE YOU A FREE THINKER?

RAMIN BAHRANI

"the director of the decade"

-Roger Ebert

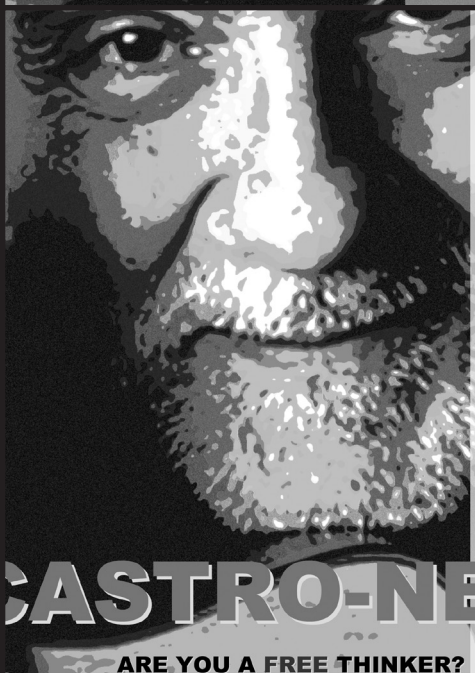
Real Reel Characters

Monday April 5, 1:00 PM Old Main Chapel

Interruptus: Aguirre, the Wrath of God

Monday April 5, 4:00 PM Macky Auditorium

*The 62nd Annual
Conference on World Affairs
April 5-9, 2010*



Feel the Beat of Free Thinking

from around the World

with

World Renowned Brazilian Musician

OSCAR CASTRO-NEVES

Slip Slidin' Away: Music Careers

Monday April 5, 9:00-10:20 AM

Grusin Music Hall

Jazz Concert

Tuesday April 6, 8:00 PM

Macky Auditorium

*The 62nd Annual
Conference on World Affairs
April 5-9, 2010*

ARE YOU A FREE THINKER?

Fig. 2. Kelly, Meghan, Poster, 2010 WRTG 3020 class, the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder.

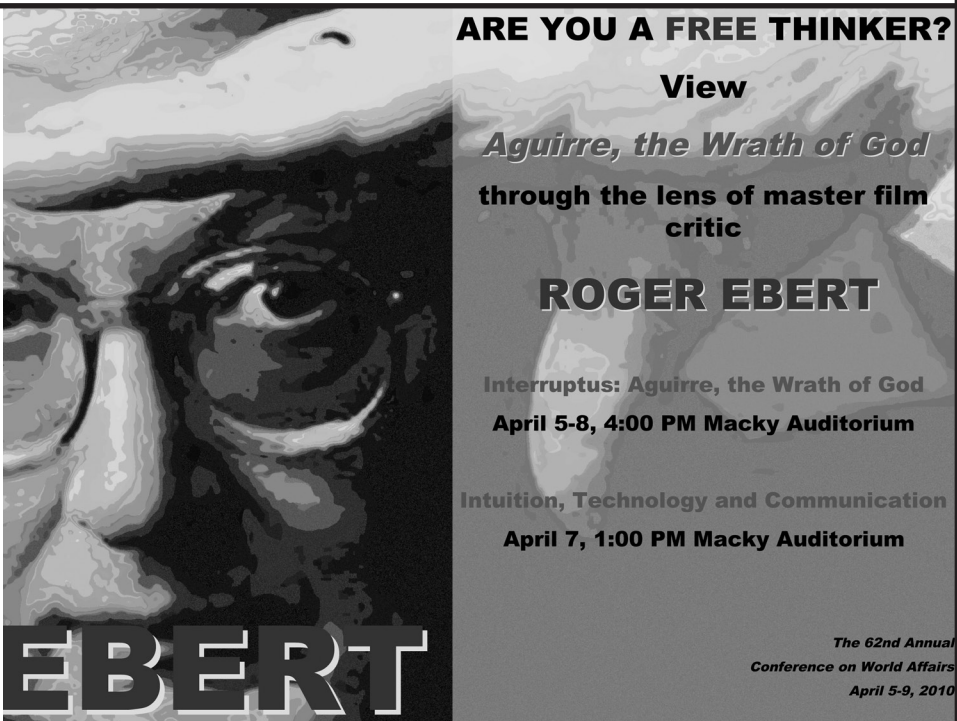


Fig. 2. Kelly, Meghan, Poster, 2010 WRTG 3020 class, the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder.

(POLITICAL) SCIENCE

The War On Science

3:30P Tuesday Apr. 6 DUAN G1B20



62ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON WORLD AFFAIRS

BE A FREE THINKER

Fig. 3. Chan, Mike, Poster, 2010 WRTG 3020 class, the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder.

THE FUTURE OF MEDICINE



62ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON WORLD AFFAIRS
PERSONALIZED MEDICINE: THE PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY

Presented by Oncologist Ruth Oratz, M.D., founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Accountability in Research* Adil Shamoo, and director of scientific education at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT Fintan Steele

**3:30PM ON THURSDAY APRIL 8, 2010
UMC WEST BALLROOM
FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**



62ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON WORLD AFFAIRS

BE A FREE THINKER

MEDICINAL MADNESS?



62nd ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON WORLD AFFAIRS

Medical Marijuana: Opening The Door – NPR's All Things Considered correspondent Margot Adler, conservative author and political scientist Robert G. Kaufman, NYU Clinical Professor Ruth Oratz, and Director of the Drug Policy Project Sanho Tree discuss the implications and future of medical marijuana.

Tuesday April 6, 2010 - 10:00A.M.
Boulder High School [17th & Arapahoe]
Free & Open to the Public



62ND ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON WORLD AFFAIRS

BE A FREE THINKER

Fig. 3. Chan, Mike, Poster, 2010 WRTG 3020 class, the Univ. of Colorado at Boulder.



In students' own words:

Anthony: "Our work this semester went towards accomplishing something external. The This I Believe project and the CWA project were aimed at composing work that is not just for the student and teacher. This is what made the class so engaging; I wanted to do a good job because I knew it wasn't just Michelle that would see my work, but everyone who read the blog, and everyone in class, and everyone on the Internet."

Meghan: "In terms of community engagement, this project definitely allowed me to become more involved in the large on-campus organization, of which I didn't have previous knowledge before working on the campaign. During the Conference week, I was definitely excited to go to the panels that included panelists whom I had highlighted in my print campaign. I was also excited to tell friends about all of the interesting panels and the highly qualified participants that spoke on the numerous topics."

Emma: "I learned a whole new skill set which I have been developing and using in real world applications, to wondrous effect. I've used my new media literacy to market myself to potential employers, to promote projects I am involved in like Slow Food events, and to communicate with friends."

The CWA organizers, too, were thrilled with the work from the class. They claim that student attendance was higher than ever at the 2010 conference, and they attribute that to my students' work.

However, now, after surviving my first experience teaching multimodal composition and coordinating a project with a community partner, I can step back and see many ways to improve the class and the experience. I had intended to work with content and readings that helped students make connections between information and media literacy and democratic participation. We started to do that in the beginning of the semester.



But I became overwhelmed by the logistical complexity of coordinating the media campaign project – and also, I have to admit, dazzled by the possibilities for multimodal composition.

While I still believe that integrating multiple modalities is crucial in the 21st Century writing classroom, and can enhance civic engagement work, I also see that the technology risks becoming a bit of a gimmick if the multimodal assignments aren't constructed carefully enough. My CWA campaign assignment was loosely designed, since I didn't know what to expect going in. This worked to my students' benefit in some ways: In relinquishing my authority, my "expertise," I opened up space for students to step in and develop their own expertise, allowing them to figure things out for themselves, with my support and guidance. Students seemed to really appreciate this. As Emma says: "The teacher was also the student since you were to some extent figuring out the curriculum as you went along, and traditional writing styles were thrown out the window, to rave reviews.... I doubt I would have learned as much from the CWA project if I had not been given the freedom to let the project develop organically." But I also lost sight of and control over the larger civic goals that I had in mind when initially conceptualizing the class. While I think students learned valuable rhetorical skills, I also think the poster projects in particular became too much about graphic design and marketing and not enough about civic engagement and advocacy.

I know that I have a lot to learn: about teaching civic skills, and about theory and practices for integrating experiential learning into the classroom, about multimodal composition, and about ways to teach writing so that students use composition and rhetorical skills to engage in real, meaningful political or social advocacy work. In particular, I am interested in focusing more on participatory media tools and less on traditional media; these kinds of media, I think, lend themselves more to active and interactive participation in public life, and are the kinds of tools digital natives are already using to connect "with one another collectively to make a difference in their own worlds" (Earl



and Schussman qtd. in Rheingold 98). In future classes, I hope to design a project that allows students to “use Web-based tools and channels to inform publics, advocate positions, contest claims, and organize action around issues they truly care about” (Rheingold 102).



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