Teaching Writing with YouTube

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Watch the YouTube video "[Did you know 4.0](#)." What *does* it all mean? We are living in exponential times and information technology's effects on society, globally and on the individual level, are real. These changes are noticeable in today's college students, because they are the first generation to have grown up with computers. For these digital natives, a large portion of written and verbal communication occurs through e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, instant messages, forums, blogs, etc. Shouldn't these social practices and their resulting discourse have a place in the college classroom? We have no choice if we want curriculum to remain current and relevant to our students.

I want to focus on the freshmen composition classroom. One simple way to incorporate technology into this setting is with YouTube. I don't mean professors should require students to create videos and post them (that would require video camera access and precious time that should be

spent writing). What I am proposing is that instructors embrace YouTube as a resource *and* a text in order to "raise students' awareness of their own discursive formations" (Wendi and Nelson). This video-sharing website offers ways to segue into writing assignments, appeal to digital natives, increase awareness of contemporary rhetorical communities, lessen the gap between teacher and student, and spark excitement in the classroom.

Reading YouTube

My argument is grounded in the idea that YouTube can be interpreted in the same ways as a standard text. Visual rhetoric may not be a text in the traditional sense, but it has many similar attributes. Conventional rhetorical principles, such as audience awareness, exigence, organization correctness, arrangement, and rhetorical appeals are exhibited by multimodal compositions (*Multimodal* 5). And most YouTube videos, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, exhibit these elements of argument. This means they can be "read, decoded, and interpreted unproblematically and acontextually" just like an academic essay (Blakesley and Brooke). We can have students evaluate what the creator's rhetorical objectives were and whether he or she met them according to the conventions of argument. Visual rhetoric also offers an alternative means to teach the modes of persuasion—particularly the neglected third appeal, pathos (*Multimodal* 4). The authors of the scholarly articles typically used in the composition classroom don't blatantly set out to manipulate their audience's emotions. At least, this usually isn't one of the primary objectives. But in visual media, this is often a chief strategy.

Some educators might negatively react to YouTube being used as a text in the writing classroom, because they believe the readings on the course syllabus should be academic essays and other intellectual works. They might also think this type of traditional reading is important, since students aren't getting enough of it outside of school. I would argue that students need both on the readings list—the tangible page *and* hypermedia. Solely reading and deconstructing scholarly articles, short stories, newspaper articles, etc., underprepares them for their interactions outside of class and their future careers, where they will more than likely be en-

gaging in postmodern, Web-based reading and writing on a daily basis (which is typically much less formal).

We must even go a step further by encouraging our students to analyze how visual media affects the viewer differently than a standard text does. Blakesley and Brooke state, "As students and teachers adapt to these new technologies and venues for reading and writing, it will be important to understand the way that words and images function rhetorically and together in the various forms of media and literature that grab our attention and so delicately direct the intention." They are exactly right. As much as we might not want to admit it, print is slowly disappearing (or at least falling by the wayside), and professors need to consider the direction texts, and society in general, are headed in. As Selfe affirms, "We need to teach them how to pay attention to technology and the issues that result from the technology-literacy linkage" ("Technology" 433). One way is by incorporating YouTube into the classroom.

The Postmodern Learner

As I've stated, the students entering classrooms aren't the students from 20 years ago, who were educated before computers became intertwined in mainstream culture. Today's learners have become accustomed to "multitasking as a way of life; emphasis on doing rather than knowing; greater familiarity with typing rather than handwriting; the importance of staying connected; zero tolerance for delay, along with a 24 x 7 mentality; and reliance on the web as the primary source of information" (Lockard and Pegrum 126). Grabbing a dictionary to look up the definition of a word or going to the library to check out a book for a research paper is laborious when Google is a few clicks away. Some might even go as far as to argue that, because of this reliance on technology and the vast amount of time young adults spend online, their brains are wired differently (Prensky). As someone born in the '80s, I would have to say this is true.

People even read differently. As Faigley mentions in his book, *Rhetorical Bodies*, the format of online texts is completely different, and in turn, people read in new ways. This type of reading involves "three long historical trajectories: the development of writing systems…the development of images…and the development of capitalism" (Faigley 174). This is appar-

ent on YouTube, where a video is accompanied by clickable flashing advertisements, video ratings, video responses, comments, a description, related videos, and even statistics about it. Reading now requires a certain level of resistance to distractions and gives the viewer the power to read chunks of "text" in any order they please.

In the YouTube video, "A Vision of Students Today," the professor of an undergraduate writing class surveyed his students and found that each one reads 2,300 web pages and 1,281 Facebook profiles a year on average, but only 8 books (Wesch). Considering these proportions, it is clear that part of our responsibility as 21st century teachers is to equip students with the knowledge to be active critics of web-based communication mediums, just as we do with hard copy texts.

On a more fundamental level, there have always been different types of learners. And videos work well for this diversity too, because they appeal to both visual and auditory learners—especially those of the 21st century that prefer graphics over text (Prensky). Plus, often a video can paint a mental image of a concept, making it easier to remember. Take the famous "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. Remember reading it? Have you ever seen a video of Dr. King delivering it? The experience is drastically different. The pathos appeals in his argument come to life. The physical aspects of delivery, such as body language, tone and facial expressions, also enhance the experience.

This is just one example of a video that could be shown in a composition classroom. A video of a poet reading his or her work, clips from scenes in movies or TV shows that can be deconstructed, updates on current events, and perspectives on controversial issues occurring on other college campuses are some more. Professors could even use a YouTube video to get a free write or an in-class debate going. The beauty of this technology is that it provides a fresh way to teach the same information, and it requires only a quick online search. Preparation for the class is no more entailed than getting ready for an in-class critique of a traditional text.

Regardless of these benefits, we need to remain conscious of *why* we are using a YouTube video over other non-web-based options. Jerry Farber provides a good point of advice: "The challenge for teachers is to learn not

to take [computer technology] for granted, to resist turning it into merely one more screen in their students' lives, and to find ways of teaching that help to realize, rather than ignore, its extraordinary potential." As long as we make the online experience meaningful and dig past the surface level of a YouTube video, it has a place in the classroom. Other types of visual media, such as movies and TV shows, don't work as well on their own because they are static and less representative of the kinds of interactive communities embedded in the lives of our students.

A Contemporary Rhetorical Community

We are in a world where the pixel is replacing the word as the fundamental unit of communication (Blakesley and Brooke). YouTube exemplifies this postmodern shift—it is the epitome of a contemporary rhetorical community. Zappen started analyzing these types of communities upon the advent of chatrooms in the '80s. He observed, "Contemporary notions of the rhetorical community characterize this community less as the locus of shared beliefs and values than as a public space or forum within which diverse and sometimes conflicting beliefs and values can be articulated and negotiated." This is a good thing. There are YouTube videos on a wide array of controversial topics (e.g., politics, abortion, gay marriage), and users have the option of posting a "video response" to a specific post. This creates a very interactive debate in which opinions can be negotiated on the spot, and with peoples from all over the world.

We can also take advantage of the comment section as a teaching point. It is a real-time conversation, almost like a forum, in which viewers can discuss their opinion of the video, whether it regards the quality of an American Idol contestant's voice or the solidity of President Obama's economic plan. *Anyone* can enter the discussion once they set up a basic YouTube account. This kind of interaction isn't possible in print. A teacher could even team up with the class to comment on a video. As a bonus, comments are limited to 500 characters, creating the perfect opportunity for a lesson in how to avoid wordiness.

YouTube is also a democratic community. As Faigley argues, "Recently most people had little opportunity to produce and distribute images, audio, or video themselves. With the advent of the World Wide Web

in the mid-1990s, technologies of the visual can no longer be denied" (185). Anyone can share his or her views by posting a video on YouTube. This makes it a great outlet for students to hear a wide variety of opinions, on a wide array of topics, from a diverse body of people (i.e., racially, culturally, socioeconomic-wise). Zappen adds, "Scholars who have explored the uses of computer-based communication technologies affirm the democratizing and community-building potential of these technologies." Students need to understand the positive and negative ramifications of such an open community.

Explaining how your students can take advantage of this community to voice their opinions is important. Wendi and Nelson comment on how easy it is: "Entering public deliberations on all kinds of public issues is as straightforward as sending a letter to the local newspaper…or posting to a blog." And I would add posting a video. Showing them YouTube videos in which this has been effectively and ineffectively carried out and having them figure out the difference is even more crucial. Faigley adds, "The Web has become the primary medium for grass-roots media activism" (194). We should want our students to be aware of the ways in which YouTube functions as a democracy.

Shrinking the Gap
YouTube can also be a means to lessen the gap between teacher and student. Finding a happy medium between being a stern authority figure and an approachable, laid back professor has always been a struggle. There have been several essays written by composition theorists that center on creating this persona in the classroom. In fact, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that teachers should form a partnership with their students and overcome "authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism." Exploiting the democratic community of YouTube changes the dynamics of the classroom in terms of the teacher-student relationship, making it more balanced.

With YouTube, the teacher is still in control of which topics will be discussed, but the message or argument is not coming directly from them or another academic—it is often coming from your average person "off the street" or from someone who chooses to remain anonymous. This lessens

the distance between teacher and student. The absence of author creden-tials or ties to prestigious institutions also allows students to drop their guard and judge the author's idea, realizing they may not be valid and must be challenged. This is the stance we typically have trouble getting students to take when it comes to scholarly texts.

Plus, academic essays and novels that we as teachers find interesting and important aren't always relevant to our students and "may not appear intelligible or hospitable to students we try to bring into our worlds" (Wendi and Nelson). In fact, one college composition class felt only 26% of what they read for class is relevant to their life (Wesch). Using multimedia to get a point across and teach a concept is a nice change of pace. As Selfe observed, "Such instruction is often refreshing (because it's different from the many other composing instruction experiences they've had), meaning-ful (because the production of multimodal texts in class resemble many of the real-life texts students encounter in digital spaces), and relevant (stu-dents often sense that multimodal approaches to composing will matter in their lives outside the classroom)" ("Multimodal" 4). The ability to apply what one learns in class to life outside of it is one of the main motivations for embarking into higher education. On a personal note, my favorite class in college was Writing for Economics, because everything we learned how to write (e.g., business plans, resumes, cover letters) directly applied to my career goals. I was able to immediately employ these writing strategies to get a good job.

In our quest to lessen the gap between teachers and students, we must remember that if the separation completely disappears, it can have nega-tive repercussions. Tietje and Cresap argue, "The increasing use of visual media in higher education represents a cultural shift that casts doubt on the traditional role of the university." Their central claim is that the do-minance of entertainment and youth culture diminishes the power of pro-fessors and the educational institution. I believe that instead of pushing technology away because of this view, we should get to know the so-called enemy. Setting aside time to show students we have an understanding of computers and how they affect society will earn us respect in the class-room.

More Engagement

Lastly, from personal experience, I know it can get boring reading theorist after theorist. The often stuffy prose, convoluted language and lack of imagery makes it less desirable. It's productive to include bits of visual rhetoric from YouTube to break up a writing course curriculum, while making sure to maintain an instructional objective for doing so. As Selfe states, "Audio and visual compositions are engaging for students…Students often bring to the classroom a great deal of implicit, perhaps previously unarticulated, knowledge about what is involved in composing multimodal texts, and they commonly respond to multimodal assignments with excitement" ("Multimodal" 4). Visual media may be the remedy for students turned off by writing—even if it is only used to get the creativity and energy flowing during an 8 a.m. class in which the last thing students want to do is analyze Foucault or Shakespeare. Tietje and Cresap argue, "There is no further outcome to be gained from being a member of an audience. Although one can expect some mimetic or cathartic effects, one does not routinely become more creative or more active as a result of consuming entertainment." I disagree. As Selfe says, students are bringing implicit knowledge and creativity into the classroom, because they already know a lot about visual media—probably more than their teachers. Being able to express this in class would give them a sense of empowerment.

YouTube is also helpful, because it lists special categories, including "Education" and "News and Politics"—great places to pull videos from to use in class. There are also educational channels; the Associated Press has one and so do most large universities. Videos become "edutainment." Although, Tietje and Cresap would strongly disagree: "Because visual media are normally used in our culture to provide aesthetic pleasure in the form of entertainment, the use of visual media in education tends to break down the distinction between education and entertainment." I think it is okay for education to be entertaining. Look at the way we learn as a child with shows like Barney and Sesame Street. We are teaching freshmen, who have come to us straight out of high school and high-school-level readings. Why not make the classroom a little less intimidating?

A Time to Tube

My intent is to argue for YouTube in the classroom without discounting the value of reading academic essays or the importance of writing. These activities should still form the foundation of a composition course. But we must also recognize that 20 years ago computers had already changed the way in which humans communicate and exchange information ("Computer" 268). Like Selfe argues, "It is important to remain in step with the ways in which students, workers and citizens are communicating, the changing nature of the texts these people produce, and the way in which such texts are now being used around the world" (*Multimodal* 3). YouTube offers ways to talk about these changes in the classroom, segue into writing assignments, appeal to digital natives, increase awareness of how contemporary rhetorical communities function, lessen the gap between teacher and student, and spark excitement.

We should want students to leave our classroom with new viewpoints and a critical lens to look at new technologies through. They should contemplate how these technologies are microcosms of what is going on in the wider culture. When our apprentices graduate, they won't be writing academic essays; they will likely be creating websites, writing articles for the Web, developing hypermedia, tweeting to market a product, and participating in other computer-based activities. Shouldn't we be setting them up for a lifetime of writing and critiquing, not just the next paper assignment?

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