#cwcon #f4: "Compose, Design, Educate: Developing a Digital Rhetorics Themed Online Writing Course"

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Introduction

In 2015, more than 25% of students took a distance education course during their undergraduate program. Online education growth continues to outpace overall higher education enrollments (Online Learning Consortium, 2016), putting more pressure on writing programs to offer online options for students. College-level factors (Rodrigo & Ramírez, 2017) such as shifting student demographics, changing institutional policy, and physical space restrictions can also contribute to increasing enrollments in online courses.

This presentation describes the creation of ENGL 106Y—the first online FYC course at Purdue University. Home of a model FYC program (ICaP) and a writing center with an international online presence (the OWL), Purdue offers a variety of FYW courses to about 2500 undergraduate students each semester. The Department of English has offered a variety of upper-division writing courses online (namely business and technical writing), as well as literature courses for at least a decade, but didn't begin developing plans for an online FYC course until October 2016. [[slide]] As our WPA explains, several forces converged then to precipitate the creation of ENGL 106Y, including administrative attitudes, institutional spaces and material conditions, and pedagogical choices.

In summer 2017, a team of faculty, staff, and graduate students designed ENGL 106Y as a distance learning counterpart to ENGL 106, Purdue's standard 4-credit introductory composition course. The course was centered around a digital rhetorics syllabus approach that emphasized rhetorically situated information design across a variety of composing tasks—combining text, images, data displays, and more. This presentation will…

- offer a brief overview of the development process for this new online course;
- provide insights into course curriculum, assignment design, and key lessons;
- articulate the value of structuring FYC curriculum around concepts of information design, specifically for writing programs that serve primarily STEM students;
- outline strategies for modularizing curriculum to provide flexibility for both online writing instructors and their students (including the incorporation of multimodal assignments), while still adhering to standard course objectives and outcomes;
- and forecast future areas for growth and development for ENGL 106Y, as well as other online writing courses like it. [[slide]]

Course Development Process, Actors, and Timeline

While I've been developing the curriculum for online first-year writing at Purdue and training instructors for a year now, this work has been a team effort distributed across

administrators, faculty, graduate students, and instructors within the English Department. The key players in this effort included our WPA (Dr. Bradley Dilger), an instructional designer from Purdue's Office of Digital Education (Debbie Runshe), another grad student course developer (Ola Swatek), and the first two instructors who taught the course (Rachel Atherton and Libby Chernouski), who also played a role in designing content.

The online course developers designed and organized all content inside a Blackboard shell, creating a "master course" for graduate instructors and limited-term lecturers to teach from during the pilot period. This master course included nine weekly modules, a syllabus, three major project descriptions, weekly discussion forums, assignment dropboxes, and rubrics. As Rodrigo & Rámirez (2017) emphasize, master courses have many benefits: aligning and standardizing curriculum with learning outcomes, ensuring that faculty and staff labor will not be wasted by continually redesigning course content, and "[serving] as a mechanism for novice instructors to learn the curriculum and the technology" (pg. 317). While the instructors for ENGL 106Y each had at least two years of teaching experience at the college level, all of them were new to online teaching, so creating a master course with pre-loaded content greatly reduced their preparation load and enabled them to instead focus on developing their online teaching ethos and providing quality feedback to students through both virtual writing conferences and evaluation of assignments.

After the master course was completed in August 2017, the team met to collaborate on video lessons. Videos ranged from 6–12 minutes and outlined course work due for the week, key ideas and takeaways from the readings, examples of course concepts in action, and lessons about the intersections between rhetoric, technology, society, and culture. Instructors recorded the nine total videos for their course from early-to-mid-September, using Purdue's Video Express Rooms, self-service recording sites that use a high-definition camera, green screen, and computer to enable the inclusion of Powerpoints and screencasts into instructor video lectures. [[slide]] In the interest of accessibility, Purdue's information technology office provides professional captioning services for all academic content, so these videos were captioned at no cost to the program. We are really fortunate to have the infrastructure for creating professional-quality video lectures at our institution.

On October 18, 2017, the second eight weeks of the Fall Semester began, and the first three sections of ENGL 106Y went live. We had eight sections in the second half of SS18, and will have twelve sections this summer. [[slide]]

Course Curriculum Design: Projects, Modules, and Rationale
The initial sections of ENGL 106Y ran for the second eight weeks of fall semester 2017. The administration encourages second eight week sections to increase access for Purdue students (Digital Education at Purdue University, 2017), especially those who must drop classes at the beginning of the semester due to illness or injury, travel difficulties (particularly for international students), over-enrollment, nonpayment of fees, or other contingencies. These eight-week online courses, while rigorous and intensive due to their fast-paced nature, offer increased schedule flexibility for student-athletes and other

learners with extensive extra- or co-curricular responsibilities, such as members of the university marching band.

[[slide]] The first three semesters of ENGL 106Y were taught from a single syllabus approach to ensure consistency of instruction and evaluation. We chose a Digital Rhetorics approach because of how easily its focus on technological issues translated to a digital learning space. This approach centers around compositions beyond words on paper, interrogating modes of production and delivery in the information age that include text, images, graphics, sound, and other forms of media.

Course content was organized into nine different modules (one for each week of the short half-term), with each project taking roughly three modules to complete. Modules were labeled for specific weekly learning goals, as shown on this slide. [[slide]]

The projects designed for ENGL 106Y progressively build off each other, moving from inward-focused to outward-focused analysis. In keeping with the Digital Rhetorics syllabus approach, projects center around students' experiences with digital tools and spaces, as well as the technological innovations and concerns within their fields of study and their communities.

The first project, a digital autobiography, asks students to create a narrative about their experiences with a digital technology, tool, or space. To practice employing purposeful shifts in voice, tone, and design, this assignment requires that students envision a specific audience for their story, and structure their narrative accordingly. Students have the option of writing a print narrative, or creating a multimedia narrative, audio essay, or digital video. In fall 2017, students drew upon a variety of experiences to demonstrate how their reading, writing, and thinking had been shaped by computers and mobile devices, including teaching their aging parents how to troubleshoot technical issues, joining digital support communities to learn to live with severe social anxiety, and encountering social and cultural diversity through reddit. Critical to this assignment was allowing students to write not only about success stories or the benefits of technology, but their struggles as well. In an effort to create a truly inclusive digital rhetorics course, assignments were designed to encourage students to interrogate how they "adopted, adapted, or alienated themselves" (Rumsey, 2009) from technology, to draw broader conclusions about themselves and the communities with which they identify.

The second project takes students' growing understandings of digital literacies and technologies and applies them to an issue that interests them in either their field of study or their community. This project asks students to construct a researched argument about a digital tool, technology, or space, using both scholarly and popular sources—assessing, summarizing, and synthesizing those sources to make a case to a community of like-minded scholarly peers. Students apply secondary research techniques to produce a piece of writing that is both informative and persuasive. In fall 2017, students crafted researched arguments about the impact of governmental policy on scientific advancement, the safety

of tower cranes in residential areas during natural disasters, the benefits of financial algorithms in creating a healthy economic ecosystem, and the safety risks of advanced optical surgical procedures.

After conducting extensive secondary research to construct a strong argumentative case for colleagues within their field of study, students are asked to redesign their communication for a different audience for the third and final project. Using Piktochart, a free design program, students remediate their second writing project into an infographic aimed at circulating in a specific digital space or community to target a specific audience to act. Using Piktochart, rather than an industry-standard document design program like Adobe Photoshop or InDesign, has several benefits in FYC (see also Lamb, Sheffield & Winet, 2016). First, students typically find its drag-and-drop interface much less intimidating than the steep learning curve of professional graphic design programs. Second, because Piktochart is a web-based editor, rather than a desktop program or app, students can access it from their home computers rather than having to download software or travel to campus to work in a computer lab (so long as they have a reliable internet connection). Finally, Piktochart has many built-in templates, as well as a suite of visual elements (images, icons, fonts, shapes, lines, etc.) that students can use for free when creating their infographics.

Information Design: A Lens, a Hinge

Early on in the development process, we determined that ENGL 106Y should highlight design as a critical component of composing and rhetoric. We selected Wysocki & Lynch's *Compose, Design, Advocate* (2018) as the core text for the class, but like many other FYC textbooks that foreground design and multimodality, *Compose, Design, Advocate* tends to reduce design solely to visual principles (e.g., page design) and graphics. [[slide]] As James P. Purdy (2014) notes, the term "design" is typically taken up in writing studies to…

1. Synonymize "plan" or "structure," e.g., "program design," "course design;"
2. Affirm the rhetorical function of visuals and layout, or to explain or revalue visual elements on the same plane as text;
3. Recognize digital, multimedia compositions, moving beyond print-based composing;
4. Draw attention to the materiality of composing;
5. Invoke/discuss design studies, calling for interdisciplinary work (Purdy, 2014, p. 615–620)

Purdy notes that design is most frequently used in ways two and three, highlighting the field's "visual turn" with the increasing availability and diversity of desktop publishing tools, as well as the rise of multimodal composition scholarship. While graphic design is important as students are expected to compose in an increasing variety of forms using multiple tools and applications, this is not all that design has to offer. Design's purview within the discipline—and indeed within first-year writing—is disproportionately focused

on graphics and images, largely ignoring the opportunity for other types of design activities, judgements, and frameworks.

As Herbert Simon (1996) notes, when "design" is not linked with the visual, it is often associated with engineering: "Historically and traditionally… it has been the task of engineering schools to teach about artificial things: how to make artifacts that have desired properties and how to design" (p. 111). Again though, *designing* is not a practice limited to engineers or graphic designers: "Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" (p. 111). All students and professionals engage in design work, whether it's to design the specifications for a prototype engine for a new electric vehicle, design a project plan for a new initiative to bring affordable healthcare to low-income areas, or design an email asking a professor for a better grade on an assignment. For 106Y, then, the task was incorporating design frameworks into a class aimed at teaching students from a variety of majors how to demonstrate rhetorical awareness, compose a variety of texts, perform research to support claims, and engage multiple different digital technologies. For this, we turned to information design: design for addressing communication problems, with a specific eye to the goals and purposes of a variety of stakeholders. [[slide]]

Information design is most often employed in technical communication courses because of its intersections with other technologically mediated activities—such as interaction design (IxD), user experience (UX), information architecture, interface design, or data visualization—but this focus is exactly what makes it so appropriate for a digital rhetorical syllabus approach, and for a population of students who are largely STEM-focused. As a pioneer land grant institution, Purdue has focused on science, technology, and agriculture education since its founding. For students in scientific and technical disciplines, design frameworks can function as a critical connection between the routine expertise of scientific method or mathematical models and the more adaptive expertise of humanistic thinking (Nelson & Stolterman, 2012). STEM students sometimes struggle with the critical thinking and complex problem-solving of FYC because they are accustomed to learning outcomes that value single "correct" answers: a model that doesn't translate well to design or composing spaces, which involve more indeterminate ethical and value choices. Combining resources in a contextual and situationally specific way can be challenging—but information design provides an inroad into this process, models for engaging in design of communication, and powerful examples that can increase STEM student buy-in. As Saul Carliner (2000) writes, information design can add value to businesses, companies, and organizations across a variety of fields, aiding in information transfer and dissemination between many different stakeholders. [[slide]]

This focus on creating "interactions" with "users" can easily translate to designing "rhetorics" for and with "audiences." By foregrounding language and principles of information design in the ENGL 106Y course materials, students were able to better

understand the importance of composing usable, rhetorically savvy texts across disciplines and contexts.

An information design approach to FYC poses such questions as:

- How do we support our communication with deliberate choices that are rhetorically attuned and user-centered?
- How do we present and organize information so that it is usable by stakeholders?
- What happens to our documents after we create and distribute them? How does information spread in a networked age with a 24/7 news cycle?
- What are the values that govern how we construct, (re)present, and share information? What are our ethical responsibilities as producer-consumers of information?

Information design involves an iterative process of planning, drafting, arranging, testing, revising, and publishing information in its myriad forms. Even if information is solely presented textually, it is still *designed*—elements like margins, white space, typography, alignment, kerning, leading, indentation, and more must all be carefully considered for their physical, cognitive, affective (Carliner, 2000), and rhetorical impacts. [[slide]]

Integrating Modular Flexibility: Developing a Curricular Grid Approach and Assessing Multimodal Student Work
While a master course template can provide a helpful springboard into online writing instruction (OWI) for new teachers, it can also restrict instructors' creativity or their ability to integrate their own practices into these digital classes. As the NCTE notes in their 2013 position statement, "Online writing teachers should retain reasonable control over their own content and/or techniques for conveying, teaching, and assessing their students' writing in their OWCs [Online Writing Classes]" (p. 15). Moving forward, in order to balance this type of control with the need to create master courses to acclimate instructors to the online environment, we're offering a "grid approach" to afford instructors some more flexibility. [[slide]]

Last fall, each of the three instructors taught from the same syllabus with the same three writing projects: digital autobiography, researched argument, and advocacy infographic. In future semesters, instructors can choose from one of three assignments for each of the three major course projects, [[slide]] following the same general learning trajectory as the original assignment sequence—moving inquiry from inward to outward, conducting research and then remediating that research for a different audience.

Regardless of the assignment configuration, all ENGL 106Y students must write a reflective memo with each of their three major course projects. The reflective memo is designed to detail the student's writing process, the decisions they made over the course of the project, and the lessons learned throughout. Similar to the "statement of goals and choices" that Jody Shipka describes in *Toward a Composition Made Whole* (2011), these memos ask

students to attend to how they negotiated their goals and purposes throughout composing, in order to develop metacognitive knowledge of their own learning and process. This is also outlined as an effective OWI practice in the NCTE's 2013 statement: "teachers should use the digital setting to encourage students to rhetorically and metacognitively analyze their own learning/writing processes and progress. Such strategies can identify growth areas and points for further assistance" (p. 14).

Incorporating reflective memos is what makes multimodal composing assignments and genre flexibility *possible* in an online course. By requiring students to justify their deliberate, rhetorical decisions about which modes to pursue and which technologies to employ in service of composing in those modes, instructors can afford opportunities for students to play with tools and explore forms of information design that satisfy their own communicative purposes. As Shipka explains, "in this way, students gain experience not only in solving communicative problems *but also in identifying and defining them*" (2011, p. 128). A flexible genre approach, combined with reflective memos with clearly articulated expectations, provides the conditions for the type of adaptive, complex problem-solving that employers value (Hart Research Associates, 2013), and that is foundational to a liberal arts education. In this way, ENGL 106Y students are not only designing information, but also systems and *futures*. [[slide]]

Next Steps, Future Work & Areas for Growth

As the development process moves forward, the course must undergo additional revisions to improve its user-centeredness (Blythe, 2001) and assess its effectiveness, based on both departmental and disciplinary metrics. As Blair & Monske (2003) note in their article on the promises and perils of online teaching, "Much research shows that fully online courses require more up-front planning, more detail in design, and just as many, if not more, contact hours with students than traditional, classroom-based courses" (p. 447). Design for this 8-week course took four months, and one of my intentions for giving this presentation is to make visible the amount of labor and time that goes into the creation of an online learning experience.

Now that the course is off the ground, I have three main goals moving forward. The first is to create a library of short video lessons about common course topics that instructors can use and reuse across sections. Instead of having to shoot new video lessons each semester, instructors can mix and match videos from Purdue graduate students, faculty, and alumni. For example, an alumna who specializes in classical rhetoric could create a short lesson on how to use stasis theory to generate arguments for an editorial, while a multimodal composing alumnus could walk students through visual design principles for a remediation project. These videos will decrease the amount of labor involved to script, shoot, and edit course videos, helping to make the ENGL 106Y model more sustainable.

This summer, we're piloting a second syllabus approach for ENGL 106Y that foregrounds academic writing and research practices. Moving from a scholarly article analysis to a researched argument essay and then a research poster, the curriculum emphasizes entering

the conversation of a disciplinary discourse community. The largest number of our instructors in ICaP don't teach from either the AWR or Digital Rhetorics syllabus approach, however: since we have many creative writers and literature scholars, there's a strong interest in teaching composition through narratives (be they literary or pop culture based). In AY18-19, the new online course developer will likely focus on developing strategies to teach composing through narrative online.

Finally, now that the team has two semesters of online teaching behind us, we can turn our eye to data collection and assessment. Our writing program has established a long-term assessment project aimed at creating common assignments and rubrics that meet our six standard programmatic learning outcomes, and each rubric developed for the major course projects in ENGL 106Y has been created based on those curricular objectives. Purdue is also home to the Corpus and Repository of Student Writing (CROW) project, which is aiming to create a digital archive of student work for research and teaching purposes. Our digital course development team will be contributing work to that archive, to continue developing curricular design and assessment strategies for online writing instruction.

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