

Composition Symposium at The Oxford Hotel on September 12th, 2008

TITLE: Exploring multimodal research traditions and methods in teaching composition

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ABSTRACT: Much work has been done looking at how multimodal writing can be integrated into the composition classroom, exploring work in different media and contexts. However, as part of many projects, research is just as important an element, but it is often used in traditional ways. We would like to discuss multi-modal research in support of writing projects. In our classrooms, we teach multimodal research strategies that involve many conceptions of research both in and outside the university. We will briefly look at using computer technology to support these research strategies, but also look at how multimodal research and writing intersect in other ways. Specifically, we will also share approaches using the MMORPG World of Warcraft.

PART I

Richard Colby

As the last vestiges of summer fade away into fall, you set about inventing and refining your syllabus for your writing class. What readings will you use this year? What assignments will you give? What activities will support these assignments? You consider the varieties of writing available, and have already considered ways that visual, aural, and textual compositions might work in your class. And then there is the research paper. Sure, it could be a research video, audio essay, or blog, but the research in question seems inexorably a part of the job description of a composition teacher—that is, text-based research. Despite the move to re-imagine how students are composing, what students are using for research in these compositions can often seem rather limited.

Cindy Selfe has expressed the importance of moving to multimodal composition, most recently in her piece of aural composition and literacy: “When teachers of composition limit the bandwidth of **composing** modalities in our classrooms and assignments, when we privilege print as *the only* acceptable way to make or exchange meaning, we not only ignore the history of rhetoric and its intellectual inheritance, but we also limit, unnecessarily, our scholarly understanding of semiotic systems” (2)

But what of research? Let's revise Selfe's comment to read, "If we limit the bandwidth of **research** modalities in our classrooms and assignments, when we privilege print as *the only* acceptable way to make or exchange meaning, we not only ignore the history of rhetoric and its intellectual inheritance, but we also limit, unnecessarily, our scholarly understanding of semiotic systems." This presentation and workshop today will offer some opportunities to consider research modalities in ways outside just text on a page.

With that in mind, we wanted to ask you to think about, what is the domain of a writing class?

Moving forward, we want to talk about our title first. For some of you, our title may have sounded a bit odd: "Exploring multimodal research traditions and methods in teaching composition." After all, our use of multimodal has most recently been connected with **new** ways of thinking about writing. However, we connected it to tradition, suggesting something old and established. Part of what we are presenting today is the old and established. To unpack this a little, let me talk about another layer and another apparent contradiction. Simply put, to date, a great amount of the scholarship about multimodal composing has been textual. Many textual arguments that in turn cite other textual arguments outline the importance and need to integrate and appreciate texts that in fact don't rely on text to make an argument. The second part of this contradiction is that a great number of writing classes have students rely on textual argument as research before making non-textual arguments despite the expertise in many different types of research methods that those who teach writing may have. I'm not condemning either practice. After all, I understand enough the politics and traditions of academic promotion. What is perplexing is that many in writing studies and across the university employ a great variety of research methods and traditions, but we often seem to limit research in our composition classes to the text. Although impressive scholarship has reimaged what writing is, we should also consider some ways to reimagine what research is in the writing classroom.

As part of our new writing program, we have emphasized a variety of research methods and traditions, and in fact, one of our program outcomes is that students will be introduced to three research traditions: interpretive, qualitative and quantitative research.

These research traditions have been around for some time in academic and non-academic practice. As with all things named and categorized, there is some debate as to the domains, so let me share some simple definitions. Interpretive research is using texts, here broadly defined, as evidence for an argument. The writer-researcher interprets the texts, picking and choosing the pieces that best forward, counter, or defend an argument. Qualitative research is the research of personal observation and interview. The writer-researcher here uses his or her experience with a culture or individual to forward, counter, or defend an argument. Finally, quantitative research is the use and manipulation of numbers to make an argument. The writer-researcher collects and organizes descriptively or inferentially numbers of phenomena to forward, counter, or defend an argument.

To begin, interpretive research has been the domain of writing courses for some time. The use of text-based sources as evidence for argument, fodder for analysis, points of synthesis is what routinely is done in writing courses. The argument could be made that it has been inherited from generations of writing teachers who were trained primarily in literature. It also could be argued that no matter the background of a writing teacher, whether literature or rhetoric, their training is in fact focused on looking at the nuances of texts. For many in English studies, this is a comfortable research tradition. It is familiar.

Qualitative research, although employed often by teachers in composition studies appears less often as a research strategy presented to a freshman-level class. Interview and observational-based research is an important tradition in looking at cultural and individual experience. To be sure, Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater's *Fieldwork* textbook is targeted at FYC courses and does present qualitative research in an accessible way for such students. But it is one textbook in a sea of many.

Quantitative research strategies are unfamiliar to many writing teachers and distrusted as positivistic reductions for still others. However, understanding how numbers are used in arguments, textual or not, is vital to producing and analyzing evidentiary claims.

What is missing here is how these three traditions work synergistically, whether in conflict or in unison to create and produce new meaning. What is also important to our program and our teaching is how these traditions are not just something that a writing teacher or statistics

teacher, or anthropology teacher does, but how each of these traditions are a part of being literate in a multimodal, multimedia, multiliterate world. To ignore these intersections and only teach one research tradition in service of writing many texts in a variety of media can make it feel to the students as if this is something that only writing teachers do.

Thus far, in presenting the three research traditions as important to the writing course—just as important as teaching an appreciation for multi-modal and multi-literate writing—I have focused on arguments, some of which are limited given the constraints of time and this symposium. I have also left off the subject of another constraint, that of research traditions being inherently limiting in thinking about research. This has always been a tricky argument for the writing teacher. Latour, Michaels and Sohmer warn about the possibilities of techniques and technologies of inscription reducing “the world and its infinite and polymorphous complexities into a finite number of relevant aspects” (270). Why I called this a tricky argument is that these simplifying techniques and technologies are, in fact, part of being multiliterate. To understand only experience and not the methods and traditions of quantifying, qualifying, and interpreting experience can leave many out of the conversations that shape not only the individual but society’s past, present and future experience.

What we need to consider, then, are what research traditions should we consider presenting and emphasizing for our students? How do we help students take ownership of research as a way to make meaning rather than just read meaning?

Introducing students to different research traditions while also emphasizing different modes of expression seems an overwhelming call for 10 or 15 weeks. One approach that is easy to implement is to have students write a paper using each tradition. This research can be presented within certain domains of knowing. What I mean is that a quantitative paper that employs a survey that the student conducts and tabulates, then organizes his or her findings into an argument structure that is familiar to survey types of research. For example, I have had students conduct surveys on replacing shopping carts into stalls, coffee drinking habits, and motivation to participate in political elections. These topics were selected by the students as being best suited for a quantitative approach. That being said, I did present this assignment as the Survey Group Report—in other words, I’m defining the assignment, they just pick the topic. This assignment starts first with students looking at sample papers in the IMRAD format,

looking at how numbers are used to make arguments in this domain of knowing. Discussions about what types of arguments using numbers are good for also emphasize the methods of collecting and presenting those numbers. Collecting and quantifying a research question often leads to an hypothesis that is presented simply as the guess. We do discuss how literature reviews are used usually to come up with hypotheses and research questions, but in this case, I want them to ask questions that interest them, not what interest other researchers. I fully expect them to come to appreciate their fields of study and the types of research questions they will ask in the disciplines later on. The point here is to get students to research a topic differently. After they have their research question, they create a survey that attempts to triangulate responses to their research question, thinking of potential variables that may impact that response. The survey is a multimodal and design experiment, and students have to think about the visuals of how a survey will look, how answers will be recorded, and what the survey says about the ethos of the researchers. After the survey results have been collected, the researchers have to figure out how to tabulate the responses. This is the fun part because it is one of the most important skills to quantitative research—how to take all of the data collected and turn it into one point. I have found that giving students fewer prefabricated options here actually leads to more learning. They, in practice, have to design their own means of organizing data, using what they know, what they have seen, and what they are learning in their other classes to draw conclusions. They then write the report in IMRAD format, following that style and organization.

Despite the great success we have had teaching a survey report, an eight-week ethnography or an analysis of visual rhetoric, we also strive to have students be more active in selecting their own research methods and traditions so that we don't impose a way of knowing and doing, but in fact, students select a way of knowing and doing that is most appropriate for a given situation or problem. It is more difficult to have students use quantitative research to think in new ways and in new domains due to the established ways that such research is often used, say, in "science" courses. The same can be said about qualitative and interpretive research. In fact, this is where research is very much a part of the writing class. The simple approach, although successful, is the recipe approach. That is to say, we present the recipe to the budding chefs and they follow the instructions. However, to research rhetorically is to understand a situation, its constraints, and the methods or traditions that would best provide

evidence for an argument within that situation. This might call for some synthesis of research traditions, some inventions of ways of knowing, and some expressions in new domains.

We think teaching qualitative, quantitative, and text-based research is important in a writing class because no matter the academic discipline, there is an element of each already embedded within school, work and play. For example, a published scientific report uses text-based, interpretive research to establish a hypothesis, and often relies on qualitative, observational analysis to produce numbers that are later manipulated to produce meaning. Similarly, a literary analysis relies on a quantity of examples for its evidence for a particular interpretation as well as a qualitative observation of a particular lens through which to interpret a text. Understanding the different traditions and methods as working in conjunction is a lofty goal. Before we consider together some further ways of introducing different research traditions within the writing class, we would like to present a class that we recently taught using the MMORPG, World of Warcraft. Rebekah will discuss how we realized, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully, having students think of research in rhetorical ways rather than recipe ways, using different research traditions to help support arguments about the game and their gameplay within the confines of a first-year writing course.

PART II

Rebekah Shultz Colby

Researching World of Warcraft

In envisioning research in multi-modal and rhetorical ways, Richard and I designed a class in which students were invited to use the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, World of Warcraft, as a research space. We challenged students to see playing the game as one way to conduct research. In order for students to see play as a type of research though, they were first encouraged to see research as rhetorical – research as a specific method chosen in order to find an answer or a solution to a particular type of problem or question in the game. Students were also encouraged to view the perpetually virtual world of World of Warcraft as a unique cultural and sociological space – a space with problems and social phenomenon a little bit different than other places. Then, through play, they searched for problems or questions about this space and then use a research method appropriate to solving that problem or answering that question.

Of course, in order to engage in this type of rhetorically centered research, students were not just encouraged to conduct traditional text-based research. They were also introduced to more qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observations, and focus groups, and quantitative research methods such as surveys. Each of these three research methods was introduced separately and we discussed the purposes, applications, advantages, and disadvantages of each method in class. Students were also assigned to read and discuss examples of each type of research method, and all of these examples were about World of Warcraft. For example, to show how one would use qualitative research methods in an online gaming environment, students read T. L. Taylor's ethnography "Does WoW Change Everything?" For an example of how one would use quantitative research to study World of Warcraft, students looked at a World of Warcraft guild website in which a player had written an in-depth statistical analysis of which rogue gear, a type of character in the game, was the best in order to do the most damage. Finally, for a look at how scholars use more traditional, text-based research to study World of Warcraft, students read Tanya Krzywinska's article "Blood, Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories," which examines how mythos is created in the game by the incorporation of traditional myths and festivals within it.

After reading and discussing a specific type of research method, students were also given a chance to use it in a brief class assignment. For example, to learn how to conduct observational research within a virtual environment, students observed and took notes of a chat channel within a major city in World of Warcraft. To learn quantitative methods, students developed a research question and hypothesis that could be counted in some way, and then briefly conducted their research in the game. To practice interpretive, text-based research methods, students looked at the game itself as a type of text and then examined what a character's racial history, religion, emotes, and dress told them about the cultural ideology of that character's race.

After students were introduced to the different research methods, we initiated the studio portion of the class. We wanted students to have free reign to design their own research projects around any problems or research questions they discovered as they played the game. In this way, we wanted students to figure out for themselves which research methods would be most appropriate to answering their research question instead of feeling constrained by one method. We also wanted students to feel free to examine their research questions and problems in multiple ways and perspectives instead of only looking at it through the lens of one epistemological approach. So, as teachers, our job was to guide students throughout their projects, looking for any potential problems they might face and helping them refine and flesh out their research projects. To help us guide them, students were responsible for writing a research plan in which they detailed their research questions and the research methods they were going to use. In this way, we were able to offer them structured and detailed feedback that was still flexible enough to serve the unique methodological needs of students' individual projects.

But while we enlarged students' research repertoire, enabling them to become flexible enough to think of research as a rhetorical choice, we also emphasized that no matter what type of research students used, they should also try to integrate it with traditional text-based research in order to find out what had been previously written about their topics and base their own research upon that. We also emphasized the importance of writing mini-literature reviews that showed how their own research was backgrounded with this previous research. And even though students also conducted qualitative and quantitative research, they often used theories from more traditional text-based research to interpret their own qualitative and quantitative data.

For example, because the perpetual virtual world of World of Warcraft is a sociologically unique space, students asked research questions probing the cultural dynamics of this space, using both traditional textual research as well as quantitative and qualitative research methods. One group of students asked what types of real life religious affiliations World of Warcraft players typically have and how this religious affiliation affects their choice of faction or race in the game. To answer this question, the students interviewed many players online. However, they also researched the World of Warcraft lore surrounding the different religions in the game using online sources such as Wowwiki to compare the religions in World of Warcraft with actual religions. Another group of students wanted to know why players engaged in griefing, or purposely harassing other players. They interviewed many players in the game and also posted questions on guild and other WoW chat forums to gather their data. However, they also found some traditional academic research on online griefing and used some of the theories they found there to interrogate their own data. Finally, one group of students wanted to discover what commodities sold best in the auction house and how players could potentially corner the market with these commodities. They interviewed many players in-game about which commodities sold the best and then used some of Edward Castronova's theories on virtual economies to interpret their interview data.

However, because we also encouraged students to use research to find solutions to gameplay problems they encountered, there wasn't always previous academic research on their topics. Instead, students had to rely solely on gathering their own field research through playing the game. In order to do this, they also often used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods to give them the fullest pictures of their results. For example, one student who was leveling a mage wanted to know which talents, or special abilities, would help him level his character the fastest. So, he leveled his mage using three different mage talent builds and quantitatively calculated not only how fast he was able to gain experience with each build but also recorded any other qualitative advantages or disadvantages he encountered while playing each build. For instance, he also examined crowd control as a factor that increased ease of play even if it didn't necessarily increase his killing speed. One student, who had never played World of Warcraft before the class, wanted to know which race had the easiest beginning zone. So, she quantitatively calculated the amount of time it took her to get from level one to five in each starting zone.

However, she also took careful qualitative notes of any other inherent advantages or disadvantages to playing the different zones. For instance, she noted how many times she died, how fast she was able to get places within the zones, etc. Another student wanted to discover how the gender and race of his avatar influenced how much gold he was able to obtain through begging from other players. He conducted an ethnography in which he recorded his experiences playing different genders and races. He also took careful notes (including multiple screenshots) of the different strategies he used to beg for money. Finally, he quantitatively charted the amount of money he was able to make from begging with each race.

By teaching a multi-modal approach to research, students were able to think of research as rhetorical – one of many possible approaches they could use to answer their questions or solve their problems. They also were able to learn to figure out which research methods were the best to answer their particular question or problem, learning that research is only useful if it meets the demands and restraints of their particular research question and writing situation. Ultimately, students were also often able to bring together several different research methods from different research traditions to give them even fuller answers to their questions.

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