

Creating Sustainable Teaching Practices for Multimodal Scholarship

Summary

I am requesting funding of \$21,000 over the five-month period August–December 2010 to complete a teaching development project aimed at creating templates for multimodal scholarship, which I will use as the basis for my English 239: Multimodal Composition course at Illinois State University. These templates will use a selection of open-source software created in partial conjunction with University of Southern California's Institute for Multimedia Literacy. The release time this stipend provides will allow me to travel to USC to work with these designers and to create three templates and three tutorials (on how to use those templates) so that my students can practice more cutting-edge and more sustainable digital humanities scholarly practices.

Teaching Value and Intellectual Significance

Education research into multiple ways of learning has shown that while writing holds a privileged place in academia, it should not be the *only* mode of communication that is taught in schools (Brandt, Cope and Kalantzis, Veenema and Gardner, Miles, Selber, Kress and Street). At Illinois State University, Multimodal Composition (English 239) is the only general education course to offer undergraduate students the chance to read, analyze, theorize, and write texts that use communication methods other than writing or speech. Multimodal Composition provides students with practice in the analysis and production of visual, gestural, and spatial modes as well as linguistic and aural modes of communication; when combined, these individual modes produce *multimodal* texts (the term used by The New London Group in *Multiliteracies: A Design for Social Futures*). The major projects for this class are multimodal scholarly texts, some of which students have had accepted for publication in online journals and presses.

However, despite student engagement in the rigorous work that is needed for multimodal productions, I have discovered that my approach to teaching multimodal scholarship is as unsustainable as is the labor of scholars engaged in their own multimodal scholarship. That is, in addition to the disciplinary knowledge a scholar needs to envision a project, she must also learn which hardware or software is needed to enact the project and then learn that hardware or software well enough to bring a draft of the multimodal text to fruition. Such practices are time-consuming, expensive, and often unique in unproductive ways (i.e., the multimodal methods and technical knowledge gained from one project are not always transferable to another). In my experience as editor of the longest-running online journal in rhetoric and composition—*Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, which publishes multimodal scholarship—I see authors who overcome (and also fail to overcome) these obstacles to compose one piece, a process that can last two or more years. But scholars continue to struggle (and the journal continues to receive submissions) because these authors recognize the value in multimodal scholarship, as evidenced by the growing number of graduate programs and humanities publications that support multimodal work¹. We must not forget, however, that research shows multimodal scholarship (and other kinds of digital scholarly practices) has also become (and must become) the domain of undergraduates² even though students have less time, money, disciplinary expertise, technical expertise, and computational resources than most faculty members do (see Anderson et al.). All of these obstacles make the process of composing, let alone teaching, multimodal scholarship difficult.

In the past year, I participated in two NEH Institutes for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities, both of which addressed similar concerns about the sustainability of multimodal scholarship, the outcome of which was to begin using more open-source tools that can be easily (and cheaply) retrofitted to a multitude of digital humanities projects. With this change, humanities scholars can create more sustainable digital scholarly practices and, thus, more and different *kinds* of multimodal scholarship. While I embrace this move in my own work, I noted that neither NEH institute addressed the issue of unsustainable multimodal practices from

¹ See the 2009 *Computers and Composition* special issue on graduate education, as well as Gossett and Lamanna. Also, in addition to journals that *only* publish multimodal scholarship (*Vectors Journal*, *Kairos*, *Computers & Composition Online*), there are several journals that accept multimodal scholarship (*Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *Fibreculture*, *Composition Forum*, *International Journal of Learning and Media*), although there are few, if any, pieces in these journals that represent this submission option. I'd argue that the same obstacles mentioned above keeps authors from submitting multimodal scholarship more widely.

² Carter and Dunbar-Odom; Dewitt, Slevin, Palmeri, and Hacker; Wysocki and Lynch; and the history of multimodal composition at the undergraduate level in Palmeri; Rice; and Sirc.

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a pedagogical perspective³. Sustainable scholarly practices shouldn't stop with scholars—they must extend to our undergraduate students in particular, not just graduate students who may become future faculty members. This project will extend these new scholarly practices to students in my Multimodal Composition class. I have taught this class nearly every semester since its inception in Summer 2007⁴ and will continue teaching it because it connects my research agenda on digital scholarship with student production.⁵ However, in order to extend these practices to the classroom setting, I need to learn a set of open-source tools I encountered in the NEH institutes: Adobe Flex, Dynamic Backend Generator (DBG), and Sophie. I would use the NEH fellowship to become fluent in these software programs and create several flexible templates (and tutorials about the templates) for students to use. The goal of these templates (discussed below in more detail) is to provide students with the opportunities to design better multimodal scholarship than they are currently able to in one semester and to encourage them to transfer this knowledge to other courses after mine ends.

Methods and Work Plan

The NEH Teaching Development Fellowship will provide me the time and resources to create three open-source templates and accompanying tutorials for scholarly multimedia using Adobe Flex, Dynamic Backend Generator (DBG), and Sophie. Learning these programs and creating templates will help me to help my undergraduate students overcome obstacles to multimodal scholarship: not enough time, money, access, and technical expertise. To complete this project, I will take a semester leave (5-months; August 16–December 10, 2010) from Illinois State University and travel to Los Angeles four times (once each in August–November 2010) for a week at a time to work one-on-one with the DBG designers and Sophie instructors at the Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) at University of Southern California.

In each successive month, I will meet with the DBG designers to further the project. In August, I will work with them to learn the DBG and complete the DBG template. In September, I will learn how to use Flex and build an interface template for my class. In addition, I will learn how to integrate the DBG with Flex, which may require an additional tutorial for students. In October, I will meet with the Sophie instructors to learn the new version of Sophie (due out Oct. 15, 2009) and create a Sophie template. In each month, after I return home, I will create the tutorials based on the templates I have started in LA. In November, I will return to LA to get help fixing any overall problems I have with the templates and tutorials, share my products with the IML team, and get feedback on an initial outline of the 239 syllabus. In December, I will finish and publish the 239 syllabus and website to include the templates and tutorials.

During my time at the IML, Director Holly Willis has offered me use of office space and basic technical resources (computer, phone, building access, wireless connection). She has written a letter of support for this proposal. I will also have access to digital humanities scholars at USC and UCLA who can provide feedback on the syllabus and on modifying the templates to reach humanities students other than those in English (since Multimodal Composition is a general education course).

Skills and Materials

Based on my experience authoring, editing, and teaching multimodal scholarship, I have chosen Adobe Flex, Dynamic Backend Generator (DBG), and Sophie because these tools are currently the most flexible

³ To be fair, the purview of these workshops was not pedagogical, and few of the participants teach students to compose multimodally since multimodality was still a new concept for their own scholarship.

⁴ The experimental course started as English 289.33: Multimedia Writing Workshop, and became permanent in Fall 2008 under English 239: Multimodal Composition. The enrollment is capped at 16, and in the four semesters I've taught it, enrollment has been 16, 13, 10, and 15. Enrollments fluctuated because (1) I changed the focus to digital scholarship, which intimidated some students, and (2) Because group work is required to complete the major project, I changed the class meeting time to a 3-hour, once-a-week class so that students could work in class on their projects. Three-hour blocks are unusual for undergraduate classes and cause scheduling conflicts for some students, who end up dropping. The outcomes of this project would allow me to change both of these issues (intimidation & long-block scheduling) to ensure this class continues to fill.

⁵ Three syllabi for this class are available at <http://www.ceball.com/classes/239/>. Please note that all of these syllabi are active blogs, including the printed PDF version that accompanies this proposal, which I hope explains why the formatting looks odd – just like multimodal scholarship, it wasn't meant to be represented on paper.

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applications that accomplish two often-desired, but difficult to implement, design concepts in multimodal scholarship: database-driven (Flex with DBG) and timeline-driven (Sophie) projects. The key with all three of these programs is their sustainability for students, teachers, and scholars: The programs run on both Macs and PCs, and they are free, so students can download them outside of a class or lab setting. Below I describe the programs and how I plan to use them.

(1) **DBG** is middleware created by *Vectors Journal* designers (Erik Loyer and Craig Deitrich) for use with multimodal scholarship. The program uses a web-based interface to provide an easy way to structure data in a database without having to learn PHP. Based on experience using DBG during the NEH-*Vectors* institute, it can transform the way an author composes multimodal scholarship in both concept and time-to-completion. I have already learned how to populate a DBG with digital assets, so I will expand on this knowledge by learning how to create new/empty DBGs (for use by my students) and will prepare a tutorial that discusses the creation and population processes for students, so they can practice with their own projects.

(2) **Adobe Flex** is an interactive web design tool similar to Flash, but it is easier to edit and is available for free. The DBG designers use Flex to create interfaces for some multimodal projects. I will learn Flex by creating a multimodal scholarly interface that draws digital media assets from a sample DBG. The Flex tutorial will describe how I created this sample site and show how it connects to the DBG. Finally, I will create a modifiable Flex template for students to use with their DBGs.

(3) **Sophie** is a multimodal composing program affiliated with USC and the IML. (I would work with IML staff members who are Sophie specialists.) Most recently based on JavaScript, Sophie uses a drag-and-drop interface for importing and arranging digital media assets on a page or linked set of pages. It also has a timeline feature where authors can place a sequence of digital assets to appear at certain times. (In this way, it is like Flash, but *much* easier to learn and manipulate.) I will create a Sophie “book” on which I will base the tutorial. Then, I will make a scholarly template that students can choose to use for their own projects.

To populate the practice DBG (with Flex interface) and Sophie book, I will use a set of digital media assets (video files, audio files, text files, etc.) about students’ multimodal composition practices that I collected for a previous project. Using the same assets for both the database-driven and timeline-driven projects will allow me to compare the two compositional concepts of multimodal scholarship that I plan to discuss in class. Also pedagogically important: My tutorials will show students how to modify the templates I create, so students can produce rhetorically appropriate work for their individual projects (not as a one-size-fits-all shortcut), and then re-use my templates, or their own, for work they do outside of my class.

Final Product and Access

Working with personnel at the USC’s Institute for Multimedia Literacy, I will learn DBG, Flex, and Sophie to create three templates and tutorials for multimodal scholarship. By providing an open-source technological framework on which students can build, they can overcome obstacles to their multimodal compositions (time, money, and lack of technological proficiency). Instead of rushing to learn the disciplinary conversations *and* technical programs in one semester, we can focus on their gaining disciplinary expertise through discussions of and projects that enact social, cultural, and institutional issues about multimodality: e.g., prohibitive access issues for students; why, when, and how multimodal techniques enhance scholarly communication; and transference of digital scholarship across the humanities. These are a few of the concepts this class currently touches on but could cover in much more depth with the proposed templates and tutorials. Students who build their projects from these templates will be able to complete work of a higher disciplinary and technical quality than students using the current, unsustainable practices. This new practice will help students contribute new knowledge to the (digital) humanities through their explorations of issues in multimodal composition. The new syllabus, which will be publicly available at <http://www.ceball.com/classes/239>, will include links to the templates and tutorials so that anyone can use these resources. I also plan to disseminate scholarship co-authored with students about this teaching practice through presentations and multimodal scholarship in open-access journals such as *International Journal of Learning and Media*. These products will come after this work plan concludes, but coincides with my long-term research interests of studying digital scholarly practices of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.