Theories in Digital Rhetoric and Digital Literacies and their Application in the Composition Classroom

The intersection of literacy and technology represents a vast expanse of study where many scholars address, and critique areas of concern in rhetoric and how these issues may or may not impact writing. Much like rhetoric, digital rhetoric has no clear and generally agreed upon definition. Current scholarship provides a large amount of attention to defining digital rhetoric, understanding what it means, and developing theories based on these definitions and understandings. The abundance of theories has led to a limiting number of scholarly works in application, and there exist numerous appeals to scholars to critically address and think about the role of technology in the classroom, its social use and the implications of both in our daily lives and writing. There are various pedagogical practices and assignments that aim to incorporate elements of digital rhetoric and build digital literacies of students in composition classrooms.

Continuing work that focuses on theory and not application can lead to what Wysocki, and Johnson-Eilola refer to as an attempt to use literacy to “give others some basic, neutral, context-less set of skills whose acquisition will bring the bearer economic and social goods and privileges” (p. 352). In their article “Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?” they criticize the approach to literacy as a skill that equals the playing field for all. Doing so does not address systemic issues, as it is an assumption that to be literate in any area is to have a set of skills that are both desirable and beneficial.

Three common areas of rhetoric, and their respective theories often included in first-year composition, include work in digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and the concept of electracy. These three provide a framework to approach the role of technology in the lives of students inside and outside the classroom. However, there are numerous theories and scholarship in these three areas that does not always reach the classroom. Without applying theories of digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy or devoting more scholarship to the application of these theories there is a high likelihood that curriculum in composition will approach digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy as an area for students to become literate in working in digital spaces without exploring the relationship between the user and the technology.

Recognizing the gap between theory and application this dissertation will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How do digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and the concept of electracy influence composition curriculum and approaches to digital literacies in the field of rhetoric?
2. What types of assignments, and platforms allow for an attempt to combine theory and application in the composition classroom?

**Lit Review**

This brief review of literature from 1991 to 2015 traces the similar movements and areas of concern within digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, electracy, digital literacies, and composition pedagogy. This literature review begins to demonstrate the similarity among three separate subfields of rhetoric. Digital rhetoric, with its various definitions and deeper understandings of the role of technology both in and out of the classroom often preoccupies itself with theory that is critical and challenging to the ever changing technological scope of our daily lives.

Richard Lanham coined the term digital rhetoric in 1993 in his book *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts.* While he does not supply a specific definition he introduces the concept of a computer as a “rhetorical device as well as a logical one” in use. He notes that the computer is seen as logical, but not rhetorical. He views the electronic word as a means to electronic expression and as such it fits within the Western Arts & Letters. Lanham attempts not only to legitimize the electronic word, and electronic expressions, but also create the space for the work that follows under his term of digital rhetoric. He focuses more on the manipulation of text and the results of moving text to the screen from the page, which is understandable given that this piece first appeared in 1992, and again in 1993. Equally as important was his view of the computer as a rhetorical device, which allowed for scholarship to be done in digital rhetoric. The scholarship done in the field of digital rhetoric varies, and as such several different approaches to the study of digital rhetoric exist resulting in several different working definitions and understandings of digital rhetoric.

Zappen (2005) in “Digital rhetoric: Toward an integrated theory” attempts to differentiate between traditional and digital rhetoric. He defines digital rhetoric as “traditional rhetorical strategies function in digital spaces and suggest how these strategies are reconfigured within these spaces” (p. 319). Zappen addresses the difficulty of applying traditional rhetoric to digital media. He situates his understanding of digital rhetoric within the digital space the writing and communication take place. This definition thus occupies itself more in the realm of the technology used to write and communicate than the strategies used. There is the suggestion that the strategies may be used differently in a digital space.

In Elizabeth Losh’s 2009 book *Virtualpolitik : An electronic history of government*

*media-making in a time of war, scandal, disaster, miscommunication, and mistakes* she

provides a comprehensive four-part definition of digital rhetoric:

1. The conventions of new digital genres that are used for everyday discourse, as we as for special occasions, in average people’s lives.
2. Public rhetoric, often in the form of political messages from government institutions, which is represented or recorded through digital technology and disseminated via electronic distributed networks.
3. The emerging scholarly discipline concerned with the rhetorical interpretation of computer-generated media as objects of study.
4. Mathematical theories of communication from the field of information science, many of which attempt to quantify the amount of uncertainty in a given linguistic exchange or the likely paths through which messages travel. (p. 47 - 48)

This definition encompasses several aspects of scholarship within digital rhetoric. It touches on digital genres as a means of discourse, public rhetoric/political messages distributed through networks, the computer generated media becoming objects of study in their own right, and the use of mathematical theories of communication within information science to gauge linguistic exchanges. The importance of this comprehensive definition is that it details the difference in approach and understanding of what digital rhetoric is, what it can do, and ultimately how it is interdisciplinary.

Carolyn Handa’s book *The Multimediated Rhetoric of the Internet: Digital Fusion* (2013) defines digital rhetoric as:

“simply (or maybe not so simply) traditional rhetoric applied visually as well as textually. It is not another form of rhetoric. We do not switch from digital to traditional rhetoric. All of the components we are accustomed to discussing in traditional rhetoric, especially having to do with style and arrangement for the purposes of conducting logical, discursive, persuasive arguments, are elements that can occur visually” (p. 18).

This definition attempts to link traditional rhetorical practices to those in digital spaces. Doing so tends to give more attention to the elements of persuasion due to the fact that this definition keeps in line with Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric.

Doug Eyman in Chapter 1 of *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice* (2015) makes a connection between digital rhetoric and visual rhetoric, based on “the sense that a focus outside of the tradition of written and spoken argument broadens the available opportunities to apply rhetorical theory to new objects of study.” Eyman continues by linking visual and digital rhetoric by writing that “visual rhetoric also draws on theory from art and graphic design as well as psychology (gestalt theory), bringing rhetoric into these spheres even as they contribute to the overall rhetorical methods,” and that since digital rhetoric includes visuals “it can align itself with these fields, as well as other technical fields—such as computer science, game design, and Internet research—that don’t usually take up rhetorical theory.” This approach continues to incorporate and promote interdisciplinarity. Eyman’s definition of digital rhetoric also accounts for the performance of composing and distributing, using a method of delivery that is not only based on speaking or writing, The implications of digital spaces suggests a reliance on the visuals used and perceived, that also find themselves closely related to methods of delivery.

Ian Bogost argues for the creation of a different branch of rhetoric. In his 2009 book *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames* Bogost argues that a “theory of procedural rhetoric is needed to make commensurate judgments about the software systems we encounter every day,” and to also to “allow a more sophisticated procedural authorship with both persuasion and expression as its goal” (p. 29). He defines procedural rhetoric as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (p. 3). This definition is closely linked to the procedural computational practices. Bogost views these practices equally as persuasive as verbal and visual forms of communication. However, rather than the persuasion done in alphabetic text or multiple modes with a knowledge of language and images it is achieved as a result of the procedural nature of computer code. The code may appear to us in forms we know, but it is essentially the result of code. Therefore, to compose media within a computer is “the art of using processes persuasively” (p. 3). His work in procedural rhetoric pushes scholars to move beyond the view that the technologies we use are simply tools available to us. Bogost view of procedural rhetoric as the “practice of using processes persuasively,” due to the nature of the digital spaces we compose in, and inhabit, make it impossible to separate any understanding of digital rhetoric from the processes we engage in to accomplish communication. Bogost specifically applies procedural rhetoric to video games, but the concept of persuasion through software, and procedural processes ought be included under the umbrella of digital rhetoric, and as a potential theory to inform pedagogical practices in composition.

Sarah Arroyo’s (2013) book *Participatory Composition: Video Culture, Writing, and Electracy* uses Gregory Ulmer’s concept of electracy as shediscusses participatory composition, and the connectedness of students that alters composition classes. This connectedness is the result of current online culture that includes what Arroyo labels “video culture,” but the concept of electracy is not limited to it, or other forms of communication. Rather, Arroyo uses it as a theoretical framework because it for her the concept of electracy goes beyond digital literacy. Electracy includes “civic engagement, community building, and participation” (Loc 27). Here we see a continued desire to create scholarship that reflects current writing practices.

**Rhetoric, Technology and the Classroom (working title?)**

As scholars in digital rhetoric worked to define the term, and identify subfields of digital rhetoric that creates a space within the field of rhetoric addresses other issues related to the implementation of technology in the composition classroom, literacy, participation and pedagogy. During this same time period of the early 1990s to the 2000s similar concerns over technology, its use in composition classes, and calls to action based on new or different writing practices as a result of developments in technology and its increased integration into our daily lives.

In “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class” Hawisher and Selfe (1991) express concern over the “new electronic classrooms” (p.55) and its impact on how writing instructors teach writing. They warn of over reliance on technology, and integration of technology in the classroom. Their advice to writing instructors is to be aware of the positive and negative influences computers may have on the writing classroom. They note that leading up to the time of their publication there was an overwhelmingly positive depiction of the role of the computer, and technology, in these so-called electronic classrooms. Based on their observations they were surprised by the amount of writing taking place in the classrooms with computers. However, the amount of writing according to them limited the time students and no “careful two-way discussions of the writing problems students were encountering” (p. 60) as a result of the over reliance on the implemented technology in the classroom. Their observations of the approaches of instructors teaching in these electronic classrooms leads to a call to “plan carefully and develop the necessary critical perspectives to help us avoid using computers to advance or promote mediocrity in writing instruction” (p. 62). Overall their view of computers in writing classrooms is positive, but they clearly point to a lack of critical awareness of the ways in which computers in the writing classroom may change pedagogical practices.

This specific outlook of technology integration is not uncommon, nor is it only associated with the integration of technology in a classroom. The appeal of a new technology, and/or new approach to a preexisting theory is undeniable. The field must carefully consider the temptation to implement new technology and pedagogy based on specific technological developments without creating a critical eye as to what its impact may be.

The New London Group (1996) in “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” provide an overview for “the changing social environment facing students and teachers” which accounts for a “new approach to literacy that they call literacies” (p. 60). The social environment they recognize as changing the result of the rise of globalized societies. They push for literacy pedagogy to include the “burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (p. 61). To do this the New London Group argues that students must understand and control “representational forms” in communications, and therefore instructors must embrace multiliteracies over traditional approaches to literacy because multiliteracies “focuses on modes of representation much broader than language” (p. 64).

Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola (1999) call attention to the general understanding and approach to literacy. This is dependent upon the notion that “if we acquire the basic skills of reading and writing—if we are literate—we have, or will have, all the goods the stories bundle together” (p. 352), which ultimately leads to what Glenda Hull writes that as an “intellectual equivalent of all-purpose flour,” by assuming that “once mastered, these skills can and will be used in any context for any purpose” (34). This view of literacy as a basic skill that leads to meaningful use in any context is not unlike Hawisher and Selfe’s view of the computers in writing classrooms. The skills acquired in using them are necessary, but that does not equate to transferability to any and all situations and contexts. Wysocki and Johnson write that this also happens with “technological literacy” or “computer literacy” in the way that “we wish to give others some basic, neutral, context-less set of skills whose acquisition will bring the bearer economic and social goods and privileges” (p.352). One of the dangers of this view of literacy as a skill does not account for the socioeconomic status/stuff.

Developments in technology account for new literacies to be learned, but agreeing upon how to do that continues to prove difficult. Yancey (2004) in “Made not only in words: Composition in a new key” declared the field to be in a most important moment, and urges rhetoric and composition to move away from composing and teaching composition that consists of alphabetic text. Yancey states “the screen is the language of the vernacular” (305), and despite this not being a new assessment in 2004, she proclaimed that “we are digital already.”

Also in 2004 Stuart Selber addresses where curriculum should go in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. Selber argues, “if students are to become agents of positive change, they will need an education that is comprehensive and truly relevant to a digital age” (234). This education requires students enhance their multiliteracies. To do this the curriculum goes beyond functional and critical literacies so that students can develop rhetorical literacies. Functional literacy occurs when a student “resolves technological impasses confidently and strategically” (p. 67). It is akin to developing the necessary skills to use a computer and its accompanying software. There is no questioning of the technology. The goals of critical literacy are for students to become “critically literate” about the dangers of computers and “able to recognize and recognize and articulate the ways power circulates in technological contexts” through a heuristic approach that helps students develop a “metadiscourse” within the “parameters of a critical approach to computer literacy: design cultures, use of contexts, institutional forces, and popular representations” (p.133). All of which essentially leads to students aware of these elements and dangers, and reflective, but not yet taking action. Rhetorical literacy concerns itself with design and evaluation of online awareness. It demonstrates the students’ ability to be “reflective producers of technology (p. 182). Here students have the means to take social action.

This comprehensive education differs from the traditional approaches associated with alphabetic text. It is no coincidence that following these strong statements in support of moving away from alphabetic text, and relying upon interfaces and digital spaces for communication that some in digital rhetoric focus more on the technology than the persuasive practices. Clarke (2009) in “The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a 21st-Century Pedagogy” presents digital rhetoric as another literacy students must develop/enhance. She uses Lanham’s *The Electric Word* to support the shift towards images and words in writing. She points to web 2.0 technologies offering access and allowing for exploring new ways to encourage authorial control of writing (p. 28). Assignments such as the E-Portfolio are highlighted as a means for “discussions of ownership of digital material” (p. 29). This interpretation of the E-Portfolio incorporates elements of Selber’s critical literacy. Clarke goes so far as to describe the composition classroom as an “emerging space for digital rhetoric” and views this as one way to develop students’ literacy in digital rhetoric.

Digital rhetoric, with its various definitions and deeper understandings of the role of technology both in and out of the classroom often preoccupies itself with theory that is critical and challenging to the ever changing technological scope of our daily lives. Digital literacies as a result of advancements in technology, and continual integration in the classroom concerns itself with developing literacies that are deemed necessary as so much of our daily lives involve interacting with an interface, or similar technology that we must navigate in some meaningful way. The composition classroom, as a result, is often the space that allows for students and instructors to apply specific definitions and approaches to digital rhetoric to specific assignments. As I see them connected in this way I find it difficult to continue to treat these three areas separately. Moving forward I hope to find more literature that supports the connectedness of these specific areas of study.

**Methodology**

In an effort to better understand how and why theories in digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy inform and influence first-year composition curriculum I will conduct qualitative research that will include analysis of documents, surveys, and interviews. This is the chosen approach to research the connection between theory and application. To identify which theories are applied in the creation of first-year composition curriculum I will establish contact with Writing Program Administrators by sending out surveys, and request interviews WPAs based on survey responses while also collecting documents to analyze.

**Data Collection**

Beginning in January of 2017 I will send out surveys to Writing Program Administrators (WPA), and first-year composition instructors at twenty universities in the U.S. Based on survey responses I will select give to seven universities and request interviews with WPAs, and instructors. If available, during this stage I will ask for the following documents: first-year composition syllabus, assignment guidelines, and rubrics. If rubrics or assignment guidelines are not available, then I during interviews I will ask questions specific to the information I hoped to gain in reviewing these documents. These questions may be, but are not limited to: How are assignments explained? Did the instructors modify the guidelines or do instructors all follow the same curriculum? What are the expected outcomes? What parts of the assignments are graded? Which sections of the rubric are worth the most points? Which sections of the rubrics are worth the least amount of points?

**Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data collected and interviews conducted will be grounded in three categories that I will create and use as a lens for analysis based on all relevant scholarship to the dissertation topic. This will include works in pedagogy, multimodal composition, electracy, procedural rhetoric, and digital rhetoric.

**Outline of Chapters**

Chapter 1– Introduction

I will introduce the topic of my research, and the specific problem/focus area of my research. This will include any and all scholarship that will help establish the problem.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

This chapter will include the literature review in my prospectus as well as scholarship on pedagogy, multimodal composition, electracy, procedural rhetoric, and digital rhetoric. This will include different definitions and understandings of digitial rhetoric since the term was first discussed by Richard Lanham in 1992. This review of literature will be essential to the creation of the three categories that I will use as a lens for analyzing my data in later chapters. At the end of this chapter I will name, and describe the three categories.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This chapter will discuss in detail my methodology, which includes but is not limited to data collection and subject participants.

Chapter 4 – Analysis of Data

This chapter will be an analysis of data collected grounded in three categories discussed in chapter 3.

Chapter 5 – This concluding chapter will contain recommendations/pedagogy.

**Projected Timeline**

Specific dates for submission of chapters and chapter revisions will be discussed with the chair and committee.

**Fall 2016**

* November – Send prospectus to committee by week of Thanksgiving
* December – Defend during Finals Week
* December – During Winter break write a draft of survey questions, and work on IRB

S**pring 2016**

* January – Submit IRB
* February – Pending IRB approval I will contact WPAs at universities, and send out surveys to willing participants.
* February - Submit Chapter 1 by the end of the month
* March – Continue collecting data, schedule interviews based on survey responses, revise Chapter 1
* April – Complete review of literature, conduct interviews and continue collecting data
* May – Submit draft of Chapter 2 by end of the month

**Summer 2017**

* Revise chapter 2
* Complete collection of data and interviews
* Write draft of Chapter 3
* Submit draft of Chapter 3 by August 1.
* Begin analysis of data

**Fall 2017**

* September - Revise Chapter 3
* October – Submit Chapter 4
* November – Revise Chapter 4

**Spring 2018**

* January – Submit Chapter 5
* February – Revise Chapter 5, revise dissertation
* March – Send dissertation to committee
* April - Defend no later than April 14 (graduate school deadline)

References

Arroyo, S. J. (2013). *Participatory composition: Video culture, writing, and electracy*. SIU Press.

[Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Clark, J. E. (2010). The digital imperative: Making the case for a 21st-century pedagogy.

*Computers and Composition*, *27*(1), 27-35.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. Mit Press.

Eyman, D. (2015). *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice*. University of Michigan Press.

Hawisher, G. E., & Selfe, C. L. (1991). The rhetoric of technology and the electronic writing

class. *College Composition and Communication*, *42*(1), 55-65.

Losh, E. M. (2009). “Hacking Aristotle: What is Digital Rhetoric” *Virtualpolitik : An electronic history of government media-making in a time of war, scandal, disaster, miscommunication, and mistakes*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Selber, S. (2004). *Multiliteracies for a digital age*. SIU Press.

Wysocki, A. F., & Johnson-Eilola, J. (1999). Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?. *Passions, pedagogies, and 21st century technologies*, 349-368.

Yancey, K. B. (2004). Made not only in words: Composition in a new key. *College Composition and Communication*, *56*(2), 297-328.

Zappen, J. P. (2005). Digital rhetoric: Toward an integrated theory. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *14*(3), 319-325.