Composition Classroom Practices: Applying Theories of Digital Rhetoric, Procedural Rhetoric

and Electracy in First-Year Composition Curriculum

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 and writing instruction. 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 subfields 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. Each provides the student with an opportunity to develop multiliteracies, but question their relationship with technology (digital rhetoric), explore their role as users of technology (procedural rhetoric), and the participatory nature of composition (electracy). 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. Students, as users of technology, need to understand how the technology can change them, but also how they can change it. Knowing how to use a platform effectively also includes understanding its role beyond completing a task/assignment. To do this students as users of the technology must be able to think critically about the impact of the technology, how using it changes them, and how they change it.

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

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

**Lit Review**

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.

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 that provide the theoretical framework for this project. 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, whereas procedural rhetoric concerns itself with the procedural computational practices of using a computer, or software. Procedural rhetoric is as equally as persuasive as verbal and visual forms of communication. Electracy moves onward by addressing the participatory nature of composition as a result of video culture. Scholarship in digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy provide a framework for new or different concepts to address and incorporate into first-year composition curriculum.

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” (p. 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 Selber’s 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 awareness of these elements of the computer, and computer software. Rhetorical literacy concerns itself with design and evaluation of online awareness. It demonstrates the students’ ability to be “reflective producers of technology” (p. 182) and earning themselves agency as users and producers of technology, which is important because both critical and rhetorical literacy it leads to empowering users of technology. Empowered user of technology can make better choices about what they use, and how they use it to communicate because they are using the computer as a rhetorical device.

In 1993 Richard Lanham coined the term *digital rhetoric* 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 creates 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. This suggests that composition is changing, and with the computer there will be different types of compositions. 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 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.

In 2005 James P. Zappen attempts to differentiate between traditional and digital rhetoric in “Digital rhetoric: Toward an integrated theory.” 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.

Five years later Elizabeth Losh approaches digital rhetoric differently. As a result of developments in technology, and increased reliance and uses of technology in our daily lives increases we see definitions of digital rhetoric that attempts to address the shift and implications of digital rhetoric. In 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 well 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 2013 book *The Multimediated Rhetoric of the Internet: Digital Fusion* approaches digital rhetoric as practicing rhetoric in a digital space that incorporates visual and textual elements. Specifically Handa defines 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 views digital rhetoric as traditional rhetorical practices in digital spaces. Handa’s inclusion of the visual elements attempts to account for these types elements one can use in a digital space. This is one example of the overlap between visual and digital rhetoric. Handa’s view of digital rhetoric as rhetoric occurring in a different space tends to keep the field of rhetoric in line with Aristotle’s definition. While definitions need not necessarily break away from rhetoric’s past there does exist an area to address new concerns as a result of advances in technology and our uses of such technology.

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. This results in the reemergence of the importance of delivery. For composition it means thinking about delivery in different ways, and for teaching composition this means teaching delivery.

What we see here is that definitions and understandings of digital rhetoric shift what we teach and how we teach. It does not necessarily replace what is previously taught, or associated with composition. In some cases it puts new importance on preexisting ideas. In others it may push us to think of older theories in different or new ways as demanded by its use in a new space. Porter (2008) addresses the role of delivery in digital rhetoric in “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric and Human-Computer Interaction.” He argues that as a result of the importance of delivery to digital rhetoric “technical knowledge is integral to digital rhetoric” (p. 220). He points out that this type of knowledge is not mechanical or procedural, but the intersection where knowledge and rhetorical/critical questions meet (Porter, 2008, p. 220). The result of this meeting is the need for what Porter describes as a theory of rhetoric that should “encourage productive thinking about how to communicate with others” (p. 220). Reclaiming delivery, as it was once a somewhat forgotten canon, is about bringing in useful rhetorical theory in an effort to produce better communicators. As technology develops and becomes increasingly important in our use of it, and reliance on it we too need to become better communicators with it while maintaining the critical awareness to question it.

While scholars attempt to define digital rhetoric Ian Bogost argues for the creation of a different branch of rhetoric. In his 2007 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.

As Bogost argues for procedural rhetoric Sarah Arroyo attempts to shift the focus towards electracy. In 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,” (p. 1) 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” (p. 1). Here we see a continued desire to create scholarship that reflects current writing practices.

If electracy is different than print literacy, then the time for a theory to turn into a practice commonly associated with pedagogy pertaining to literacy and composition is not needed with electracy, because the “notion changes from a theory into a practice to a practicing theory as it is emerging” (p. 104). The approach to how we teach in electracy is different than print literacy, because as Arroyo argues electracy offers us a chance to work with “established forms as well as inventing new ones as they become timely and necessary” (p. 111). This makes electracy important because it attempts to include composition practices as they happen and are needed in real time. This includes, but is not limited to writing outside of the classroom on multiple platforms.

**Rhetoric, Technology and the Classroom**

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” (p. 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 only of alphabetic text. This moment centers around the opportunity to include multimodal composition, and for students to develop multiliteracies. Yancey states “the screen is the language of the vernacular” (p. 305), and despite this not being a new assessment in 2004, she proclaimed that “we are digital already,” which helped to legitimize the inclusion of digital assignments in composition classrooms.

Selber’s (2004) 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 as a means to access and allow 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.

Building on Clarke’s idea that the composition classroom is a space to incorporate concepts of digital rhetoric, I think it can also be a space to include procedural rhetoric, and electracy. It can be argued that there are assignments, such as those that incorporate multimodal composition, implements elements of digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy. Multimodal composition provides students the opportunity to practice composing in different modes, which can lead to students developing multiliteracies, using new/different software, question relationship to technology, and practice composing in non-alphabetic text. The concept of multimodal composition will be further discussed and developed in the full review of literature in chapter 2 of the dissertation study, along with more scholarship on digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy.

**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 an analysis of documents, surveys, and interviews to answer the following research questions:

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

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. The surveys will be sent out to WPAs at Research 1 (R1) universities, R2 higher research activity universities, and R3 moderate research universities. Surveys will be distributed to universities at different research levels in attempt to pull from a diverse group, avoid saturation of data, and compare and contrast first-year curriculum at different types of research universities.

Survey questions asked will be: What is the Carnegie Classification ofyour institution? Has your first-year composition curriculum changed in the last 5-10 years? If so, what changes to the curriculum were made? How many, if any, multimodal assignments are part of curriculum? Does your curriculum include a video essay or video project? Does your curriculum include audio assignments? This is only a sample of potential survey questions. Additional questions may be needed, or the current questions will be modified.

After reviewing survey responses I will select five to seven universities and request interviews with WPAs and instructors. If available, during this stage I will ask for and conduct a discourse analysis of the following documents: first-year composition syllabus, assignment guidelines, and rubrics. If rubrics or assignment guidelines are not available, then during interviews I will ask questions specific to the information I hoped to gain in reviewing these documents. Interview questions asked will be: How are assignments explained to students? Do instructors modify assignment guidelines or do instructors all follow the same curriculum? What are the expected learning outcomes for multimodal/video/audio assignments? Is assessment focused more on process or final product? Interview questions may change depending upon survey responses.

**Data Analysis**

The surveys will provide context and background for each university. The survey questions are aimed at gaining knowledge about the types of classrooms composition classes are taught in, and the ratio of text only assignments to digital, or multimodal assignments. This information will provide me the opportunity to analyze how the classroom set up may or may not impact the inclusion of multimodal, video, and sound assignments.

Following the analysis of survey responses I will interview WPAs and instructors. The interview questions will allow me to collect information that will assist in helping me attempt to trace the link between specific theories of digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy and what is practiced and included in first-year composition curriculum. 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. Scholarship will include works in pedagogy, multimodal composition, electracy, procedural rhetoric, and digital rhetoric. This lens will allow me to analyze the syllabus, assignment guidelines, rubrics, and interview responses in an effort to determine which theories are turned into practice in the form of assignments.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study may stem from the small sample size. The universities participating in the survey, and interviews I conduct will not be representative of all universities and first-year composition curriculums. There may no be obvious connection to a theory in digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy, which will not only make analysis of the documents collected difficult, but could lead to me making decisions or assumptions about the data collected. As this study does not include the work of the students it is impossible to gauge student understanding of the concepts.

**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, as well as multimodal composition. This will include different definitions and understandings of digital 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 2.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

This concluding chapter will contain recommendations/pedagogy. Recommendations will be in the form of assignments that may be representative of theories digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and electracy that are not part of current first-year composition curriculums.

**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)

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