Many scholars address, and critique areas of concern in digital rhetoric and how these issues may or may not impact writing. Much like rhetoric, digital rhetoric has no clear and generally agreed upon definition. With many different definitions there are various similar and conflicting approaches to studies and scholarship in digital rhetoric. The lack of a universal definition, however, is not necessarily negative. Scholars in the field have the freedom to explore many different areas of interest to digital rhetoric. However, the result of this can be a large amount of attention is given to defining digital rhetoric, understanding what it means, and developing theories based on these definitions and understandings.

The drawback of this is the attention given to definition and theory in digital rhetoric, and a lack of scholarly work in application. Currently, there exist numerous appeals to scholars to critically address and think through many issues pertaining to technology, such as interface theory, glitch, blackbox technology, multimodal composition and digital literacies. These areas of study include work in understanding the role of technology in the classroom, its social use and the implications of both in our daily lives and writing.

All of the theory discussed within digital rhetoric, and creates a lot of good conversation, but what does it do aside from draw our attention to it? Equal attention also needs to be given to how we incorporate these theories in the composition classroom, or a writing intensive classroom. Digital rhetoric can no longer to afford to primarily focus on theory, and/or build upon preexisting theories. It’s time for the call to shift from pushing scholars to be aware of the technology and how it impacts our writing, and start incorporating more of the theory into our pedagogy. Using assignments that allow for theories to be applied in the classroom also exposes students to the theoretical work done in digital rhetoric in a practical, and engaging manner and look toward the development of assignments that aim to bridge the gap between theory and application for scholars, instructors and students to use and further develop their writing skills. (Three categories to help classify assignments.)

(brief history of digital rhetoric) Part of the problem, as it often is, stems from the many different definitions and understandings or approaches to digital rhetoric. 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 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. His view of the computer as a rhetorical device allowed for scholarship to be done in digital rhetoric. The scholarship written in the field of digital rhetoric varies, and as such several different approaches to the study of digital rhetoric exist resulting in no generally agreed upon definition. (This, of course, is the case with many terms. The lack of a generally agreed upon definition is not necessarily bad. In fact, it is my opinion that as developments and advancements in technology continue, which we know they will, the lack of a universal definition will be beneficial as no such definition will limit work done within digital rhetoric.)

In the early 2000s attention returned to digital rhetoric. It, of course, is no coincidence that this occurred during the beginning of public use of social media networking sites, and as a generation of students entered college classrooms

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). 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. So, while it helps to create awareness and understanding for what digital rhetoric is, or can be, it does not assist in moving beyond definition and applying this specific view of digital rhetoric to practice.

(2009 brings us) Ian Bogost, prefers to view digital rhetoric as procedural rhetoric, and in his 2009 book Bogost 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 of using a computer. Bogost views these practices as 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.

Therefore, to compose media within a computer is “the art of using processes persuasively” (p.). His work in procedural rhetoric pushes scholars to move beyond the view that the technologies we use are simply tools available to us. This type of procedural rhetoric falls under the umbrella of digital rhetoric because “using processes persuasively” in 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.

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 us* one of the more comprehensive definitions of digital rhetoric to date.

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. And perhaps most importantly, this is the all encompassing definition needed to help propel curriculum in first-year composition, or any writing intensive class that wishes to incorporate technology into the classroom forward.

Between 92 and 2005.

During this same timeframe of the 90s, and mid to late 200s, scholars in digital rhetoric worked to define the term and create a space within the field of rhetoric, attention is also given to other issues of technology, literacy and pedagogy. The 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 is where I think the gap between theory and practice widened. Mostly because, as we are all aware, a call or appeal based on a theory does not often include how to do it, or replicate what scholars do in their own classes. This, I believe is the result of the view of digital literacy as a basic skill all students must possess.

Wysocki and Johnson in 1999 write that often times the view of “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). Viewing it as a skill leaves it on a functional level. The dangers of this functional approach are well discussed in Stuart Selber’s 2004 book *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. In it 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 is where the idea of developing multiliteracies for a digital age is introduced. To do this the curriculum goes beyond functional, and critical literacies, so that students can develop rhetorical literacies. Selber’s push for curriculum to move beyond the functional, and challenge students to develop critical and rhetorical literacies centers more on software, which is indicative of where technology was in 2004. He does not provide specific assignments; rather he discusses the outcome goals that we ought want our students to achieve.

And that ultimately leads us to where we are now. A large amount of work in digital rhetoric focuses on defining digital rhetoric while paying close attention to the relationship between the user (student) and the technology they use. Digital rhetoric keeps going, as does the technology. As it advances and develops so do areas of concern. These include, but are not limited to work in glitch, and demystifying the magic of the interface.

Lori Emerson (2014) in *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* calls attention to the blackbox technology in iPads and iPhones. She describes the interface as “magical,” and that it’s continually presented as “something that allows us to perform magic tricks” (11). This assists in keeping the technology hidden behind the “glossy, attractive packaging” that serves to lock away the “inner workings” of the iPhone and iPad. The issue of concern here is that the iPad was built to keep how it works from becoming public knowledge. The implications here are that an interface that is commonly used, and that other products mirror or mimic, will never truly be known or comprehended by those that users. If, or when an interface or other technology does not work it is a glitch. A glitch in the technology exposes it as a technology, and how often do we view the things we use in our daily lives as technology? The more reliant we are in our uses of tech, and so our view of it changes.

This is important work, and should not just exist at the level of theory where only scholars discuss and provide insight. But, how does something as this reach a classroom? And in what form do these assignments take?

In the classroom we see some of this in the form of an increased use of and implementation of technology in the classroom. Assignments in first-year composition curriculum focus not only on composing, or writing, in alphabetic text only, but in video assignments, multimodal compositions, the creation of e-portfolios and websites and the use of social media. Areas of interest in digital rhetoric include, but are not limited to user experience, interface theory, the relationship between the user of the technology, and the two-way relationship between user and technology, which addresses how the use of technology changes the user (us) and how we change the technology by using it. So the question becomes, how do we combine the two, especially if time only allows for one “digital” assignment.

The answer, I believe, comes in the form of several of these digital assignments. No longer can we only have students create a website or e-portfolio at the end of the semester, or compose a video and hope it provides them the experience in multimodal composing. No, we need more assignments, but they need to focus on the process and not be

1. There is the novel type of assignment 🡪 The assignment that incorporates technology, or a specific platform. These types of assignments require/ask students to complete an assignment that is “digital” but tends to promote the platform, more than the practice. The emphasis is also on the product and not the process. Emphasis on skills, assumes access, and beginner knowledge. Emphasis on digital literacy, (using template to create website/portfolio)
2. Critical 🡪 About the practice. Looks at process. Not necessarily grounded in digital rhetoric, or beginning to address issues of digital rhetoric and digital literacy simultaneously, (multimodal composition, making a meme/gif, social networking sites, using tags)
3. Relationship 🡪 Approaches practice and assignment from digital rhetoric lens, emphasis on relationship between user and technology, and its implications, issues of access addressed/discussed, user as creator/builder, (TWINE, Building a website/portfolio, adding/building on a template)

Theory is important to study, and understand within any field, but if we’re not active in our engagement with the theory then it may not achieve what it sets out to do, which is inform the practices of scholars. Theory should, I think, direct us and challenge us. It also should not be only for scholars. If the theories have real-life implications, either inside or outside the classroom, then assignments should be developed with them in mind. This is not a new concept. However, in digital rhetoric it seems conversation may not always move from theory to application.