

WR260: RHETORICS OF AMERICAN CULTURE: Xbox vs. iPod: Convergence (of) Culture in American Rhetorics

Why This Theme?

For the Field

While it might be a feature more specific to my own pedagogy than to pedagogies in general, I have always believed that a solid theme is critical to any course. Just as a solid essay needs some sort of focus and consistency, so does a class; it needs something to hang from, a frame, a structure that makes sense to the students.

As I considered teaching a professional writing class, I consulted the readings I did early in this semester to set a foundation for the field. I wanted to make sure that I was building on that tradition, focusing on things that relate in some ways to technology and that open avenues for students to do work that is clear and concise, work that serves a specific function with a clear audience and that in many ways emphasizes usability.

I also wanted to make sure I chose material that would allow me to put a strong focus on rhetoric, since the class is “American Cultural Rhetorics.” I built the foundational rhetoric readings based on what I’ve experienced in my own classes, translated down to a smaller scale due to time and the relative rigor of the course. While it goes largely unstated in major texts, rhetoric is clearly central to professional writing, and a professional writing class without a theoretical base seems destined for failure.

At the same time, I thought about what I noted as I surveyed *TCCQ*, I want the course to be both where “we” as a field are but also where “we” as a field appear to be going. Issues of race, of culture, and of ubiquitous computing/technology spread are quickly moving into positions that will—I believe—rival considerations of documentation and workflow, of networks and of technology, in professional writing.

Thematically I wanted to capture this moment by choosing things that were at one point distinctly American properties but which have taken on global importance, but at the same time I wanted things that are deeply seated in technology and popular culture, things that students will have access to and understand in intimate ways. I also wanted to select things that “live” in interesting ways (with rich marketing, frequent development and advances, made by companies that have social standing and political clout).

For Michigan State's Program

In most ways the needs of MSU's program are the same as the needs of the field; we “do” professional writing in what could be described as different ways, but all the foci for the field I mentioned in the previous section apply. There are, however, some specific concerns that I wanted to address within the program based on current trends.

The first, and perhaps the most important, issue I wanted to emphasize is that students get a strong rhetorical foundation, particularly in consideration of cultural rhetorics. Students graduating from the program, based on exit interviews, surveys and portfolios, appear to receive less exposure to theory and considerations of culture, race, and globalization, than one would expect given the curriculum. Students emerge highly literate in the conventions of the field and capable of sustained, often beautiful, projects that show high technical proficiency but at many times lack the rhetorical sophistication that should be paired with such proficient work. My course works to counter that trend by foregrounding and repeatedly returning to theory and considerations of culture.

At the same time, the course I've created considers the potential for resistance to theory and the study of culture. I've framed all of the discussions around Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*, a book heavy with popular culture and digital material, along with the course theme elements of Microsoft, Macintosh and *World of Warcraft*. This will present students with the chance to identify rhetoric and culture through familiar elements.

I've also crafted the class to focus on collaboration, a major program goal, and I've inserted a number of places where the students should be able to create showcase work (things to share with peers or to share with the larger world). It is my hope that through generating useful documents the class will hook into other projects and other courses, integrating the issues that I'm presenting into the larger academic lives of my students. In that sense they wouldn't just be getting rhetoric and culture studies in my class but hopefully taking it with them and seeding other discussions in other PW classes and functions.

Why These Texts?

It was exciting, and a valuable learning moment, for me to plan a course that is as much (if not more) about the reading than the writing, that is about the discussion and about building a set of ideas. I've chosen a diverse set of texts that I think, pulled together, will create an effective course.

Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student

The greatest struggle in picking readings was finding "a book" that I felt covered the basics of rhetorical theory and history in a way that was accessible and engaging for undergraduate students. So many of the texts in our field are either jargon-dense and written to a graduate student/scholar audience or highly politicized and skew the tradition in a specific way. While I cannot claim this text is perfect, it does a fine job of presenting the field in a way that students should be able to digest.

I also don't plan to use all of it in class, but I am glad that it is so information-rich as it will provide students with a great resource for their own individual research. In that sense it might be one of the more powerful one-stop reference books I've found for students in any rhetoric-related field.

The sections I have chosen to use from this book will enable me to quickly and effectively prepare my students for the more specific, targeted works we'll be reading in the following weeks. This book and our time working with it are meant to provide a foundation to build upon.

Convergence Culture & Readings

I have seeded the semester with a number of individual readings (see brief attached annotated bibliography) which are paired with a larger text to aid students in building rhetorical understandings and scaffolding toward projects. I will not be elaborating on those readings here.

The Jenkins book offers a fantastic frame for what the sort of work I am asking the class to do. I'm not sure I would be confident claiming that we should call the class "Convergence Cultural Rhetoric," but I do think I can easily model for students the sort of thinking I hope they'll be doing by having them read and grapple with *Convergence Culture*.

Jenkins refers to convergence culture as:

Convergence doesn't just involve commercially produced materials and services traveling along well-regulated and predictable circuits. It doesn't just involve the mobile companies getting together with the film companies to decide when and where we watch a newly released film. It also occurs when people take media into their own hands. Entertainment isn't the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. *Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels...* for the foreseeable future convergence will be a kind of kludge—a jerry-rigged relationship among different media technologies—rather than a fully integrated system. [p. 17] (my emphasis)

This includes media as diverse video games, the internet, portable devices, file sharing, TV, movies, etc. More importantly, it weds, in interesting ways, to stereotypical student lifestyles, as much of what Jenkins discusses will be familiar terrain where they exist as expert users and fervent consumers. The way he talks about convergence culture fuses technology/technological advancement (and digital rhetoric) and American culture, asserting that what we live in is essentially a still-forming, fluid, elastic technological and traditional

convergence that constitutes our (American) culture. Jenkins raises more questions than he answers, but he opens multiple avenues for inquiry and careful consideration of issues that have direct, tangible impact on the lives of our students. It also presents theory in ways that make it digestible for students who might not be experienced reading theory, and in that sense I am confident it will give students something to grab with both hands while reading more theoretical and less accessible companion pieces.

Cult of the iPod & Smartbomb

These two texts do the same sort of work that the Jenkins book does, but they expand on specific examples in more sustained ways. *Cult of the iPod* is, as one might guess, about the history and culture of the iPod, and *Smartbomb* is about video games and computing. Both of these books share the triad of goals I had for some texts in the course: 1) they are accessible but theoretical (at least in places—they are also historical), 2) they model the sort of work I want students to consider doing, 3) they build on the theme I set up for the course while also offering students springboards to go in other directions of study. Paired with more “academic” texts from the field, these two books will give the class a solid example of sustained inquiry and how to weave research and theory into a vibrant, useful, entertaining document.

Rhetoric and Ethnicity

I made a strategic choice for this to be the one anthology that my students actually buy for this course. I did this for three reasons: 1) I want to use almost all of it, so PDFing the majority of a book for my students seemed suspect, 2) I think students treat books with more importance than they sometimes do digital documents, and I want them to subtly feel a stress on considering the ideas in this book even though I didn’t want to literally warp the class to over-stress these issues, and 3) I wanted the students to see a collection from the field that

was diverse and interesting in terms of content (so they would know what a rhetoric “book” might look like), and as the published proceedings from a conference, this anthology is both diverse in terms of writing styles and presentation AND indicative of what our anthologies look like.

I am particularly pleased with this anthology because Keith Gilyard’s introduction does such amazing work, both in terms of presenting key ideas about the rhetoric of ethnicity (and race) and in terms of illustrating so perfectly how one sets up a collection of related but at times not perfectly connected works. It is my hope that as part of the work for the class we will compile a similar collection, so seeing what one looks like will enable us to think about that sort of work in a useful way. Gilyard also uses popular culture examples in the introduction, creating a perfect set of hooks to situate his work alongside Jenkins, Kahney, and Chaplin & Ruby.

Why These Assignments?

I wanted to balance the course so that students are held accountable for all the reading, because while I’d love to think they’d simply do each reading and come to class ready to discuss, I’m a realist, and a student myself, so I know how that actually goes. At the same time, I wanted the accountability to be tiered, so that it wouldn’t be so sinister as to give the class a quiz every day and so that it would foster learning and development of ideas and theories as opposed to expecting rote knowledge.

The lowest stakes, but I hope ultimately most useful, part of the course is the response blog. This is basically a place where students will write about what they’ve read, providing that moment of synthesis that so much of learning theory reminds us is critical for idea retention. It should also be a place of great invention for the students, as I will describe it and sort of “market” it as such. The next tier will be the group readings, which students will select and present, giving them agency to shape the course and to share their ideas. Next would come

the midterm, which is actually going to be a sort of course dictionary (a set of definitions, in the students' own words, in a blue book because I want them to experience that). And finally will be the major projects, where the stakes are high and the work should show a high level of polish and development.

Based on my experiences as a student and a teacher, I am confident that this manner of scaffolding will lead to rich development of ideas and thought work by the students, and I am also confident that because of the ways they are being held accountable students will essentially work themselves into our out of the grade they want. There should be little question as to what has gone wrong if a student is doing poorly, as I have attempted at each step to make the expectations for course success clear.

Assignment 1

This class is all about building focus and scaffolding, working from general to specific so that students can do focused, concise, creative and rewarding work. In some regards it also flips my usual expectation, as I almost always place the assignment I think will be most difficult at the end of a course. In this case, I think the first assignment, if done correctly, will take more thought for the students than the second and third. I structured the class this way because assignment one serves a need as we move toward assignment two and three.

If this assignment works the way I hope it will, and the way it is designed to, each student will create an interesting mix of informational report (a lit review) and an application of theory (an example) from a specific rhetorical theorist. If the class has the enrollment that it could/should (approximately 60) the combined works of all the students would be a significant student-generated, student-audience reference guide for rhetorical theory. It will also give students a chance to do what they're reading, and it will build all the skills needed to move into the next set of projects. I realize that in some ways it might be overly ambitious, but I plan to provide the students with several examples (which I might have to generate) and to discuss

the assignment often in ways that will insure that students know exactly what is expected and have the tools to get to a finished product.

Assignments 2 and 3

The second and third assignments ask the students to do the sort of writing that the authors of their major course texts (Jenkins, Kahney, Chaplin & Ruby) are doing. I have structured the assignments to emphasize what I think is a key issue related to understanding American Cultural Rhetorics: inside and outside (meaning, in this case, inside and outside of America, though one could easily reverse the position of inside and outside and still study the same concept). Assignment two asks the students to think about an American cultural “thing” (as they decide to define that—an artifact) operating inside American culture, and assignment three asks them to look at some American artifact circulating American culture in a foreign land.

This hooks onto the key concept of globalization, but more importantly it asks the students to do two highly intellectual and at times mentally difficult tasks: turning the lens on oneself/ones own culture and then understanding “the Other” having carefully considered oneself. I am confident that such a pairing of assignments will require students to call on everything we have read and learned and discussed throughout the semester, and this sequence of assignments will allow the students to showcase in active ways the learning they have done as a part of the course.

Annotated Bibliography of Other Course Readings

Baron, Dennis. (1999). From pencils to pixels: The stages of literacy technologies. In Gail E. Hawisher & Cynthia L. Selfe (Eds.), *Passions, pedagogies, and 21st century technologies* (pp. 15–33). Logan: Utah State UP.

The importance of this text lies in the way that Baron situates writing technologies historically and rhetorically. He starts with essentially the first writing tools (scratching wax with a stylus, for example) and builds a theoretical framework that accounts for how the computer is just another evolution in a line of writing tools as opposed to a dramatic, seismic change.

Bizarro, Reza Crane. (2004). Shooting our last arrow: developing a rhetoric of identity for unenrolled American Indians. *College English* (67)1, 61-74.

This piece, along with the Powell piece below, is one of the articles I come back to again and again as I attempt to develop a sense of what rhetoric means to Native American-ness. This piece is particularly powerful for me because while Powell's piece is written by a mixed-blood and makes solid mention of mix blood ideas, Bizarro's entire article is based on the concept of being outside of both cultures as a mixed blood unenrolled American Indian. It's powerful and very readable as an introduction to thinking about Native American rhetoric.

Bolter, Jay David and Diane Gromala (2003). Seeing yourself in the virtual mirror. In *Windows and mirrors: Interaction design, digital art, and the myth of transparency*. Cambridge: MIT P.

This piece is particularly useful because it theorizes about the Windows and Macintosh OS interfaces, utilizing some of Bolter's other key ideas (transparency, immediacy, remediation). It's very readable for what is actually complex theory, and paired with the Selfe & Selfe piece builds a solid foundation for anyone interested in looking at the cultural implications of interfaces.

Gee, James Paul. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave.

I'm going to bring this book in and allow the students to choose a chapter for me to PDF. It's currently the "it" book in terms of gaming studies in rhetoric and education. The specific activities we might tie to it will be based on which chapter the students choose, but it's a text I am hyper-familiar with.

Sirc, Geoff. (2004). Box logic. In *Writing new media: Applications for expanding the teaching of composition*, eds. Wysocki, Anne Frances, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc. Logan: Utah State P. 111-46.

This is another of the pieces I chose because of its theoretical utility. I think Sirc is at times dense, and this might be among the two or three most difficult things I've chosen for my students to read in this course, but I believe that for the ones who wish to think about their work in this way will find "Box Logic" offers interesting concepts and a framework for inquiry that is unique on this reading list.

Kress, Gunther. (2004). Multimodality, multimedia, and genre. In *Visual rhetoric in a digital world*, ed. Handa, Carolyn. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 38-54.

Because the professional writing students will be exposed to visual rhetoric in another required course I tried to keep the visual rhetoric content here light, but for those who want to do any sort of visual-rhetoric-based work I wanted to insure there was at least one assigned reading that would take them into the heart of that theory/methodology. I know some don't favor his work, but I think Kress offers a solid foundation here that might be highly useful for undergraduates.

Nakamura, Lisa. (2007). *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the internet*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.

Much like the Gee book above, I'm going to bring this text in and allow my students to select a chapter for us to read. I reviewed the text over the summer, and it's one of the few pieces out there which looks specifically at race in digital spaces. The direct ties between class and content will depend on which chapter the class chooses, but I can see ways that each chapter would integrate well with Jenkins.

Powell, Malea. (2002). Listening to ghosts: an alternative (non)argument. In *ALT DIS: alternative discourses for the academy*. Schroeder, Fox, and Bizzell, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann. 11-22.

I love this essay as a teaching tool for three reasons: 1) it is challenging but accessible, 2) it introduces a completely different type of discourse (the collage essay), and 3) it "does" the cultural rhetoric it discusses. I think any student studying cultural rhetoric should be exposed to it.

Selfe, Cynthia, and Selfe, Dickie. (1994). Politics of the interface: Power and its exercise in electronic contact zones. *College Composition and Communication* 45(4). 480-504.

This is an essay I have personally tried to take up and revitalize, as I think it is of incredible importance as we move deeper and deeper into digital rhetoric. Paired with the Bolter/Gromala chapter above, this piece will create a solid foundation for interrogating interfaces culturally and in terms of accessibility.

Wysocki, Anne. (2002). With eyes that think, and compose, and think; On visual rhetoric. In *Teaching writing with computers*, eds. Takayoshi, Pam and Brian Huot. 182-201.

While this piece claims to be on visual rhetoric, I think it's much more of a digital rhetoric piece. It's one of the few articles in the class that specifically looks at how "the gaze" as it is called in film studies operates in digital spaces. It is also valuable to look at how Wysocki's rhetoric functions in text, as she is a distinct voice in the field, reading more like a craftsperson or artist than like a scholar (at least in places).