

## Genre and Transfer in a Multimodal Composition Class

Cheryl E. Ball, Tia Scoffield Bowen, and Tyrell Brent Fenn

IN SOME OTHER CHAPTER, IN some other collection, a teacher writes about how great her semester went teaching a new syllabus that seemed to have worked extraordinarily well. She details that syllabus and discusses how the assignments were sequenced; she concludes by providing quotes from the students' portfolio reflections to show that they learned a great deal from the class, from her. The reflections would say things like:

When I was a child, I was fascinated by technology. I had an 8-bit Nintendo, built my own computer, and generally geeked out when it came to science and technology. But I wasn't always interested in this stuff. Personally, I blame Ender. I don't know who introduced me to the science fiction novel *Ender's Game*, but whoever it was inadvertently sparked my love for books, science, and technology. Working on the documentary in English 3040 reminded me of my early school years and my love of technology as a form of expression. As a kid I had a wild imagination, and as a senior in college [when I took 3040] I had a lot of ideas to express. Technology,

writing, and good teachers gave me a way to do it. (Excerpt from Tyrell Fenn's design justification, December 2006)

Insert the teacher's glowing reflection of the class and the student. Then the teacher would insert another student reflection, this time moving the argument along toward the multimodal bit she was intending:

Growing up, I was determined to be an inventor. What I wanted was for people to crowd my little cul-de-sac just to get their hands on the only "decorative mud-ball" in town. But since nothing I created had a significant impact on society, I quit the idea and my inventor dreams seemed to be doomed for good, until this class came along, giving me the option to dabble for a grade. My perspective of inventing has grown: Now my idea of invention is still tied to what's important to me right now, but how I invent something to fill that need has changed. For instance, unlike my older sister, who writes and writes and writes in her journal, I get overwhelmed by journal writing, but I love to reminisce and hold onto memories, so camcorders and pictures became my journals. Before I learned how to use programs that made slideshows, I would line pictures up next to each other on the floor, turn on a song in the background, make sure cell phones and pagers were turned down, turn on my parents' oversized camcorder, and record each picture manually. Watching them now, it's comical, but then I thought it was brilliant. (Excerpt from Tia Scoffield Bowen's design justification, December 2006)

That, however, is not this chapter. It would have been if written several years ago. Now, the then-brilliant reflections by the teacher seem comically naïve. She is not such a noob (newbie) anymore to think that that imaginary version of this chapter would still have been accurate. Instead, this chapter is about a once-upon-a-time, newish tenure-track teacher who misplayed a crucial teaching moment, which spiraled into a misuse of genre, and how she learned to recover and resituate her teaching-research with a genre studies approach. And the students (Tia Scoffield Bowen and Tyrell Fenn) are not trapped in some time-independent "student" status where their design justification statements represent a stagnant contribution to multimodal research. This chapter is now a coauthored piece written by two once-upon-a-time students and their somewhat nutty teacher. All three have moved on from the English 3040 course at Utah State University, and all three have continued to work in multimedia fields. This chapter synthesizes the experience of a multimedia composition course and asks how concepts of genre transfer across multiple boundaries.

## A MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION CLASS

The course catalog description for English 3040, *Perspectives in Writing and Rhetoric*, is “an in-depth study of rhetoric and writing for non-majors” (Peterson 2009–10, 549). Over the three years Cheryl taught this course at Utah State University, she treated it like a special topics class in different forms of multimodal composition, and the genres that students produced were expansive:

- (a) websites (i.e., religious travelogues of missionary trips, commercial sites promoting student-run businesses, genealogies, an intranet training site for a local veterinarian’s office, and promotional sites for student clubs);
- (b) literary hypertexts (poetic, prosaic, and imagistic); and
- (c) videos (documentaries, poems, remediated research papers, visual argument slideshows, music videos, etc.).

The course topic—digital narratives—for the fall 2006 term in which Tyrell and Tia were enrolled was purposefully vague because Cheryl did not want students to have to choose from a narrow set of genres as they had done for the e-literature version of the course. Narrative left the generic option open, because Cheryl’s hope was that students would produce a range of genres as well as multigenre texts.

Students sometimes resist open-ended assignments, which had been a staple and seemingly successful part of Cheryl’s *Happenings* pedagogy repertoire. She chalked it up to the lack of incense.<sup>1</sup> But she had stuck with it because a *Happenings* pedagogy best explained what she did in her classes and why she did it, and it allowed her to change teaching directions suddenly if needed. This pedagogy is infused with a socio-epistemic critical lens (add Berlin 1988 to Sirc 2002, if you will). Geoffrey Sirc would probably approve despite his criticism of composition’s epistemic turn and its formation of, in his words, “a compositional canon” where material restraints—that is, what we can and should be producing in writing classes and writing scholarship—are born (Sirc 2002, 7–8). Cheryl doesn’t think, as James Berlin (1988, 485) has argued, that an expressive-ish *Happenings* pedagogy—as Sirc dreams it—is focused solely on “liberating students from the shackles of a corrupt society.” It was Sirc’s goal to examine and disrupt the space and materials of composition studies after its epistemic turn, and it is one of Cheryl’s pedagogical goals to examine the material, rhetorical conditions in which we compose, while also asking students to produce texts that break out

of traditional material restraints. Thus Cheryl combined socioepistemic and Happenings pedagogies, with a little critical, cultural, feminist, multimodal, and other pedagogies thrown in as needed.

As an early tenure-track faculty member in 2006, Cheryl worried that a Happenings pedagogy—one filled with wow and wonder and a want to write, to make meaning—was a thing she should leave to the tenured or the avant-garde. That worry is relevant to this story and yet she is a stubborn, mouthy daughter of Southern women, and she tends to do what she wants when teaching, if there's good justification for doing so. Sirc's pedagogical manifesto oddly justifies the brand of sustainability she was using in the teaching of writing: the recursive nature of teaching, learning, and writing as open, collaborative processes. Because she wants students to compose texts other than those that were typically found in first-year and other writing classrooms in 2006 (and, oh, how things have changed in those intervening years!), she needs to teach in a way so that students can relearn how to compose in media that is new to them as composers (not consumers), using modes of communication that are also new to their compositional wheelhouse.

To prepare students for the English 3040 course, Cheryl spent a good portion of the first day(s) convincing students that the course actually fulfills their writing requirement. In that discussion she didn't refer to the theoretical support for this work, such as the New London Group's *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) or Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's (2001) *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. But that foundation is clearly evident in how she introduced students to the idea that none of us communicates only through writing and that written text itself is multimodal in that it carries visual, spatial, and sonic properties every time students type a new letter-character on the page. The course would then launch into a sequence of rhetorical analysis and production, each week covering a different medium. In relation to the 3040 class, here are some examples of modes, media, and genres used:

- *modes of communication*: linguistic, aural, visual, spatial, gestural, and combinations thereof (see Cope and Kalantzis 2000, 26).
- *media*: written text, static image, audio, video with only diagenic sound of the shot location, video with soundtracks, other audio, and writing.
- *genres*: blogged reading response, analog photograph, digital illustration, voiceover, soundtrack, vogs, and video documentaries.<sup>2</sup>

The syllabus was set up to step students through these progressively more multimodal and multimedia assignments. Although this metaphor was dated to her own process of learning to write before computers, she likened the shift from linguistic to aural to visual modes of communication in these assignments to how students at an early age first learn to write with crayons, then pencils, then pens (and now computers). This progression gave students hands-on practice with the increasingly complicated technologies they would need for their major projects. Once they got to the final project, students could readily see how the added, mediated components were sequenced to prepare them. But the main reason for using this assignment sequence was so that students could spend a week discussing how each medium (writing, audio, video) helped readers understand the text.

At the end of each semester, students indicated their raised awareness of critical and rhetorical (as well as technological) literacies—exhibited in portfolio reflective letters, in-class feedback to the instructor, and narrative course evaluations, as well as in the portfolio of work students submitted. For instance—and regardless that Cheryl promised just paragraphs ago not to rely on years-old student reflective writing to explain her coming to terms with the way she taught multimodal composition classes—Tyrell concludes the design justification of his video documentary about martial arts, “East Meets West,” by hitting nearly all of the teacher’s happy-dance words as possible:

In the end, weaving a meaningful narrative using music, images, video, text, and voice really made the assignment worthwhile. The video editing and text creation were important aspects of that process, but it is the people who watch the film—those who may not already love martial arts or understand why or how it came to the States—whom I kept in the forefront of my mind during the composition process. The struggle to accurately represent the views of others forced me to think critically about the way the film would be received and therefore I had to think critically about the various media I was collecting and composing for the documentary. As part of being able to choose my own topic and interview people I knew (and some I didn’t know that well), I learned that it’s important to frame others’ comments in ways that are fair to them while still choosing clips that are interesting to read or see. Ethics became a bigger concern when I knew the people whose words were being represented in my documentary. That’s something that may be more difficult to relay (to students, to audiences) when you’re dealing with impersonal texts. The creation of a research proposal for the

documentary—while not a lot of people’s idea of a good time—was a great learning experience that helped me foresee the ethical choices I had to make in the media I used. The proposal allowed me to put what were just ideas down on paper in a way that could be systematically useful to both my professor and me. Even in a narrative text, the research you do can and should change the direction of that text. If I had been unflinching in my drive to sell my message, it is likely that the significance of the message itself would be lost.

One of the biggest lessons I took away from this project was that being given more power over my education (i.e., choosing the genre, focus, and media for my assignments) gives me more motivation to perform. It’s something that I knew before but that was emphasized by this assignment. I liked all the other classes I took that semester, but I found myself worrying and working on the documentary in preference to other classes. Also, the assignments that led up to the documentary work focused on one aspect of the documentary process and were great preparation for the final project. For me, the introduction to technologies (such as the audio-editing software) was unnecessary because I’ve worked with them my whole life, but I can see how it was important to other members of the class, and I was able to help others who needed it if I already knew how to do a particular assignment or task. In the end, the sequence of individual media assignments leading up to our documentary research proposal, storyboard, interviews, and choices in editing the media clips provided me with a process in which I could understand how to ethically compose a multimedia text for a specific audience and purpose.

Tyrell’s reflection, however, is not representative of the majority of the students who had been through that iteration of English 3040, nor of Cheryl’s previous iterations of the class. Students indicated in their numeric and narrative evaluations that despite the teacher’s enthusiasm for the course material, the syllabus lacked organization and focus. This is not an unusual critique for her teaching, and students don’t always mean it negatively. One dedicated student referred to her teaching style as “controlled chaos,” which Cheryl knew would not sound appropriate in the rhetorical situation of her impending, third-year tenure review. So she had crafted the digital narrative version of this class (which occurred the semester she was to have her teaching observed in preparation for her third-year review) to turn what students perceived as chaos into what they could recognize as a purposeful yet spontaneous series of events while also unintentionally clamping down on the opportunities



Cheryl thought open assignments provided for students. Here's what happened:

When the semester started, students were supposed to choose which genres, or combinations of genres, they wanted to use in their major projects. But the students and teacher discovered about four weeks into class that the experimental design of the syllabus was perhaps too grand in the making. The original syllabus had two major assignments: The first one was purposefully vague so that students could choose which combinations of media and genres they would use, which, as Julie Jung (2005, xi) noted, would help students disrupt their generic "expectations [and] result in expanded and revised points of view," helping students to "develop the epistemological pliancy one needs to negotiate responsibly in an ever-changing world."

The second project was an inquiry-based video. Cheryl had been speaking of this second assignment as a narrative documentary, in which she wanted students to use the storytelling techniques they'd learned in the sequenced assignments as a way to frame their documentaries. In negotiating a revised syllabus, students voted to remove the vague assignment in favor of the documentary. There were several reasons for their choice, including that the vague assignment was supposed to be composed in a software program that wasn't yet installed on the lab machines. That, and Cheryl knew it would be easier for the students and her as instructor to come to an understanding of the genre conventions of a documentary project. Since time was an issue, choosing a specific genre seemed to make sense. The students would still be able to use what they had learned regarding modes and media in fulfilling the video documentary assignment. In addition to the documentary, students would be required to produce a set of "supplementary materials," modeled on Jody Shipka's (2005) framework for multimodal composition. The purpose of this assignment was to ask students to reconsider the original rhetorical situation of their documentary and then to compose a different set of texts that would accomplish a related purpose for a different audience and through different media and genres, thus practicing their rhetorical and technological literacies through the practice of transfer (see, e.g., Russell 1995 and Smit 2004).

Partway through the semester, Cheryl noticed that half the students seemed to compose more naturally in different modes than the majority of students from previous semesters. For instance, Tia had told Cheryl that she made video projects all the time for her friends (a fact she elaborated on in her end-of-semester design justification), so Cheryl

asked Tia to bring one of her videos to class for the group to analyze. Cheryl wanted students—especially those who were still leery of the narrative-documentary assignment—to see what she knew they were capable of completing and to reassure them that she wasn't expecting a professional History Channel documentary, the genre of which seemed to be a constant reference for them in class. A Happenings pedagogy allowed Cheryl to use Tia's video without having viewed it before class (a point we return to later in this chapter). Tia's video was about a group of friends reenacting a practical joke on another group of friends. It was a little crude in the storyline and editing (in both senses: coarse and awkward), but also fun, fast-paced, and full of subject matter that the students could relate to—a good example with which to draw students into the assignment.

The students adroitly analyzed Tia's video, and Cheryl realized as they mapped the sequence of scenes onto the dry-erase board that the students had picked up on the video's five-paragraph-like theme—it had an introductory scene, three supporting scenes, and a conclusion scene. It was an easy connection, but she was surprised that the students grasped it so quickly. She asked how many of them had produced homemade videos (or similar projects) before this class. Nearly half of the students raised their hands. She was shocked, dumbfounded that she had waited until midterm to ask about their new media literacies. In her previous two years of teaching video-based projects at that school, only one or two of the students had produced similar texts. Her expectations of the students hadn't changed from that—this was not her first mistake nor was it to be her last in this class.

#### THE MOVING TARGET OF STUDENTS' MULTIPLE LITERACIES

When that fall 2006 class began, YouTube was barely on folks' radar, Facebook was a month away from its public debut, and Twitter was not even a few months old. Cheryl was unsatisfactorily using a blog for the first time in a class. So it was still surprising to her when two students were vocal proponents for multimedia authoring. But it wasn't at all surprising when she found out how long they'd been working on creative media projects. Tyrell had helped start an after-school class on multimedia his sophomore year of high school. Much to that teacher's dismay, he and his fellow students were more interested in playing games than producing media. However, in the second year, when the teacher gave the class the opportunity to split into groups and work on creating their



own educational multimedia projects, things turned around. Tyrell and two of his best friends, Joel Gillespie and David Eckels, started work on a space-themed project titled “Tour of Our Solar System.” This small design group was in charge of every facet of the project, including photo manipulation, 3-D animation, sound, video, and a whole lot of storyboards and text.

In the mid-1990s, personal computer–based animation and editing had just emerged (the first fully 3-D animated film, *Toy Story*, was released in 1995). The scope and novelty of the media Tyrell and his friends wanted to use entailed a split in responsibilities. Tyrell worked on the 3-D animation and photo- and video-editing while David and Joel split written content and programming, respectively. Those responsibilities became blurred, and other important aspects like sound design were managed by all three of them. (Joel now has his master’s degree in computer science, Dave graduated with an anthropology degree from an Ivy League college, and Tyrell got his undergraduate degree in liberal arts and sciences and is pursuing a master’s degree in instructional technology.) In the end, the three students got a working program together and presented it at the Utah Multimedia competition, where they earned several design awards.

As for Tia, the video footage and pictures that she takes document her life. They record the people she’s with, the activities they do, along with their personalities and memories. The manual slideshow-making ended when Tia discovered iMovie and learned to manipulate the footage even more to capture a mood or personality. The slideshows became more advanced with the time she took to learn different features, and the programs improved. It was exciting when Tia got a digital camera and could record tiny video clips—the pictures came to life, and Tia learned how to work with sound and do cropping. Every year of college, she made a new slideshow, advancing her techniques little by little. The final products were ending up more than forty minutes long, showcasing memories of that year in college. Producing these slideshows were her creative outlets: Tia could choose how to do them and what to include, reflecting her youthful desire to invent while also creating something her friends and family enjoyed.

Before the documentary assignment in Cheryl’s class, however, Tia had never worked with that much video (she had used still clips juxtaposed to look like video or very short video clips), so she had to learn the basics of transferring from camera to computer. Tia felt confident that she could produce what was expected of her, even though this was

her first documentary on camera. At this stage in the class, Tia seemed to appreciate her earlier experiences of writing, making slideshows, and inventing and understood that the documentary was not expected to be of professional quality, because of the introductory nature of the class. Cheryl had reassured the students that there were not any rigid guidelines for the project, which was encouraging to Tia and the other class members. (Preparation for this final project, both in and out of the classroom, enabled the documentary assignment to not be outside of the student's challenge zone. Instead, the culture of the class seemed to be excited and exploratory, making the hardest part just deciding what topic to actually choose. Few students, if any, seemed worried about how they would pull it off.) Carrying out the final project required a good amount of time, patience, and resources, but students could use anything they could rhetorically justify. This meant that the skills Tia already had with editing technology, combined with the possibility of creation, made the project exciting for her.

The assignment to create three supplemental texts, separate from the documentary, was yet another way to express herself through means besides writing. Tia's documentary project looked at why college-age people show interest in the supernatural. In keeping with that theme while producing three texts (two of which had to use different media than the documentary), Tia decided to compose a song—a dramatization of one of her documentary's scary stories—and create a batch of creepy candy with advertising. She chose to invent a candy because the other texts she had produced were fairly intense. The creation of candy offered a lighter experience in the form of comic relief while portraying a commercialized version of the supernatural. Here's how Tia described the candy-making process:

My train of thought started with marshmallows because the tasty little things are a stereotypical staple at campfires. I couldn't just turn in marshmallows and claim them for my own. So I set out to the local grocery store and purchased the necessities: mini marshmallows, caramel squares, and hardening chocolate. (Not to say these were the only items that made their way into my inventing process.) After multiple burned fingers, a smoky kitchen, and a little of this and a little of that, I had something edible and justifiable to my theme. The wrappers would be advertisements meant to verbally relate the candy to my documentary. The one slogan I composed that did the most work for me was developed from a definition for "supernatural": "describing abilities which appear to exceed possible bounds." I

didn't fit the definition within the documentary, so in the candy advertisement, I added to it. It read: "Your mouth will feel like it is describing abilities which appear to exceed possible bounds." Changing it into an advertisement gave the definition in a creative way that also promoted my treat. The best part was that at the end of the class open house, in which we got to present our final projects to classmates and faculty members, I went to collect my plate of creepy treats, and they were gone. So good, they disappeared!

Tia admits that when she first heard the word "rhetoric," she really had no idea what that meant for a class. Initially her motivation to take English 3040 was because a friend was taking it and as an English minor, it fulfilled a credit she needed. Some of her favorite classes so far had included fiction and nonfiction writing, because she not only could use but was required to use her imagination. During an in-class discussion a few weeks into the course, it really clicked that the slideshows, movie making, song writing, and creating of all kinds that she had done prior to this class did in fact have structure and development congruent to the essays she was writing for her nonfiction English class. This class, with Cheryl's guidance, took a portion of a slideshow Tia had made the year before and analyzed it until it was clear there was a theme, beginning, middle, and end, among much else. She began to see that what she had done—initially just trying to archive photographs, video clips, and music to give as gifts to her closest friends—was effectively communicating a message and a story.

The problem, however, is the way that the in-class discussion set up the entire class, most of whom were less experienced at multimedia authoring than Tyrell and Tia, to produce the equivalence of five-paragraph videos.

#### ACCIDENTAL HAPPENINGS

##### Cheryl's Reflection on "Wowlessness" and Transfer

To follow the genre conventions of (self-)reflection in design justifications, we switch from third to first person in the following sections.

Tyrell and Tia, as well as other students in the course, drew from their basic, critical, rhetorical, functional, ethical, and technological literacies in relation to new media production, which they indicated by describing instances of compositional processes (including hurdles and revisions) within a particular phase of production. For instance, Tia foregrounded

the social aspects of invention when describing her need to create mud balls so that she could become famous, at least within the cultural context of her cul-de-sac. The design justification allowed her to make critical connections between that youthful experience and her adult invention (and revision) process for the ghoulish, yet yummy, snacks she made for the final project. Tyrell explicitly discussed the basic, functional, and technological literacies he brought to the class, but the design justification allowed him to address a topic that had been only briefly covered regarding ethnographic interviewing techniques—the ethical considerations that guided him through the video-composition process. The reflective documents made seeing these students’ sophisticated connections possible (see Shipka 2005). Yet this is not an assignment that I have chosen to repeat because most students’ discussions of their literacy practices were demonstrated better in the written design justification than in the final texts, and that runs counter to my purpose in teaching multimodal composition practices.

For instance, the documentaries for the fall 2006 class were “safe,” as Patricia Sullivan (2001) would say. Nearly every student was successful at fulfilling the requirements of the video and supplementary projects, but I had to ask: Would the documentaries have been more rhetorically powerful, more aesthetically interesting, more “wowful” had the triangulation of mode-media-genre assignments been different? Tentatively, I believe the “wowlessness” is connected to the genre limitations I implicitly imposed on the documentary form, a form I persuaded the students to implement in a course that was really intended to be an introduction to digital, multimodal composition (not a course about documentaries).

As Jung (2005, 56–78) remarked in her book *Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts*, using multigenre texts opens spaces for rhetorical listening and revision—not to correct or make students’ texts perfect, but to “put the wrong words together” so that texts take on new, and before unseen, layers of meaning. In this case, “the wrong words” are substituted with the wrong modes, media, and genres. When juxtaposed, the wrong mix (or even the right one) can create breaks and silences, which in turn requires authors and readers familiar with linear genres (like these students’ documentaries) to shift their expectations, to become attuned to making meaning from the unexpected, to potentially embrace the wow. Instead of allowing for the unexpected, which would have been a major benefit to my Happenings pedagogy, I was trying to make the students’ texts perfect by assigning them a specific genre she had set up in a formulaic way that they could fulfill.

If I had to attribute the wowful breakdown to a particular moment, it would be the day I showed Tia’s homemade video in class while my tenure chair was observing. Tia’s video wasn’t the cause, of course; it was my reaction to a situation much more complex than that one day of teaching. That day was the tenure chair’s second visit to observe my teaching, which she would write up, and I would submit as part of my third-year review that fall. The chair’s first visit to class had been unsuccessful because my lesson plan of having students sign up for free Wordpress blogs so that they could discuss the rhetorical nature of blog-theme options had turned into an unforeseen technology troubleshooting session. Students had not been able to retrieve their Wordpress passwords because their university e-mail accounts wouldn’t allow any nonuniversity e-mail through. I would describe watching my teaching strategy on that first observation visit like watching a pink, squealing pig on the way to slaughter. Although Tyrell helped me out of that situation by figuring out how to bypass the e-mail restrictions on the students’ accounts, the tenure chair decided it would be best for her to reschedule the observation.

The day of the chair’s second observation—approximately a week before her letter and my tenure portfolio was due—the digital projector was unexpectedly not working and I wasn’t going to waste another observation day trying to troubleshoot. In overcompensating with my newly thought-out Happenings pedagogy, I asked students to huddle around my computer screen to watch Tia’s video. After viewing it, they discussed the video in a call-and-response, with students shouting answers that we scribbled on the board. In an “aha” moment that I was hoping would make me look smart and teacherly in front of the tenure chair, I pointed out that the students had applied the generic structure and conventions of a five-paragraph essay to Tia’s video. Jackpot.

So I had done it. I had encouraged the students to map formulaic writing onto their new media texts, which the majority of their documentaries enacted to a T. There’s not much unexpected or wowful about a traditional five-paragraph essay, whether it’s composed in print or in multiple media. But it is relatively easy to complete, which is why I have seen this formulaic, expected writing happen even when undergraduate and graduate students are given open assignments to compose in any or multiple genres, modes, and media. Few students embrace the unexpected when fulfilling a project in which the only requirement I have given is to “produce a text that uses multiple modes and media.”<sup>3</sup> What is more typical is for students to uptake, just like the majority of the 3040 students did, a familiar genre like the five-paragraph essay, or for graduate



students the academic/research essay, onto a new medium such as video. The majority of those students do not engage in the critical and reflective revision strategies needed to understand the purposes and usefulness of new media composition; that lack of engagement is reflected in their design justifications, which often turn out thin and unsupported by effective rhetorical and aesthetic choices.

That is why I do not assign design justifications in my multimodal courses any more. I have come to see them as a school-based genre that doesn't have any context outside of a particular writing class. I am the sole audience for these documents, and my primary purpose in assigning them was to ask students to justify, literally, what their rhetorical decisions in a new media piece were. Although that goal isn't a bad one, it created a learning situation where the students had no responsibility for ensuring that the new media piece would speak to its audience clearly and on its own terms. In 2006 it made sense to accept that students were limited in their compositional techniques by technological literacy constraints, and thus having them write may have been a good substitute. However, I see years later, authors for the multimedial journal I edit—authors who are often first-time new media composers—struggling and succeeding, often with the same mentorship and guidance I provide students, despite their supposed technological constraints. If I expect authors of new media scholarship to succeed, and to have their work stand on its own upon submission, why should I expect students to self-assess their rhetorical intentions in writing?

This rejection of written justifications is not to say that others won't find it useful, or that I wasn't initially wowed by Tyrell's and Tia's (as well as other students') design justifications. I was. But that was because most of the justifications were so much better than the final videos, which I had ruined from the start by imposing a genre that had been uptaken in primarily dull ways, in an activity system of an advanced composition class. Elizabeth Wardle (2009, 774) has called these "mutt genres," which are assigned to "mimic genres that mediate activities in other activity systems, but within the FYC [first-year composition] system their purposes and audiences are vague or even contradictory." In speaking of these fake-audience, school-based genres, she wrote that "if students are taught decontextualized 'skills' or rigid formulas rather than general and flexible principles about writing, and if instructors in all classes do not explicitly discuss similarities between new and previous writing assignments, it stands to reason students will not see similarities between disparate writing situations or will apply rigid rules inappropriately. In



other words, one reason for lack of transfer is instruction that does not encourage it” (ibid., 770).

The digital narrative class was the epitome of “instruction that does not encourage” transfer in new media compositional practices because the course assignments relied on the written documents to indicate that transfer. Sure, students were able to put together videos that worked and that made sense, which was more than many of them had done. But those projects weren’t dexterous in their use of genre, primarily because students neither spent enough time analyzing a range of similar documentary genres nor understanding who the audience of their particular documentaries would be. I had simply allowed for the substitution of the medium of video for the medium of writing, as if documentaries were a flaccid, mutt genre.

Speaking of mutt genres, jump to my third-year portfolio, in which I had a nice letter about how enthusiastic a teacher I was (if a little disheveled in the lesson-planning department) and how obvious it was that my students were engaged in their learning. Tyrell and Tia had volunteered to write up their design justifications as their portion of a proposed coauthored book chapter, and I was able to include that information in my review as the first example of coauthoring with then-undergraduates, which would later become a significant thread in my research. (By the way, it was a positive review for a third-year tenure-tracker trying to push new media at a research university.) I have since left Utah State and have tenure, and Tyrell and Tia have graduated, but we three continued to correspond over e-mail about this chapter and on other life events. What struck me as most important to this coauthorship has been the paths that each author’s life has continued to take with respect to their multimodal composing practices. These practices have built on previous passions and knowledge while also being composed within authentic rhetorical situations. The next two sections are recent reflections (from 2010) that Tia and Tyrell wrote about transferring their multimodal composition practices from that course to their everyday writing practices.

#### Tia’s Reflections on Transfer

One aspect of the 3040 class and subject that has stuck with me the most is how multiple modes and media are powerful tools in expression. A lot of what I do now is videography. I use it fairly regularly to teach at-risk teenagers, and I’m watching it empower them to express their

experiences and feelings in ways writing an essay does not. I have drawn reference to 3040 in efforts to design a syllabus for these teenagers to use videography as a new creative tool. I've learned to take my slide-shows and video to a more professional level, now experimenting for a little money and not only a grade. I've continued to use a blog, which has been a very useful way to keep in touch with friends and family living all over the world. This was really important to me in October of 2009 when my mom, who was living in Tokyo with my dad, had a heart attack. I made a "get-well video card" to cheer her up and let her be able to see me. I posted it on my blog and a lot of other people added comments and sent pictures to make something really special for her. I don't know if this example is too personal, but it is one way that video and blogging have been really important to me lately. I feel like I draw reference to the 3040 class a lot, even if it's just to think about what I created while there, and it gives me pride. For instance, the supplementary song I wrote for the final project was the only song I've written, even though it's something I would love to do more. Having taken that class, where I got to successfully use some of my core passions and talents, has given me ideas about what direction I want to take those passions and talents further. And as of fall 2011, I am combining my multimodal composition and outreach interests by starting a masters degree in human development and family studies so that I can continue social work through personal connections in multimedia.

#### Tyrell's Reflections on Transfer

I'm not sure if it's by happenstance or design, but I've continued to be involved in "creative" literacies and media. In my job, or what many of my colleagues from my graduate program refer to as "the real world," I'm in charge of corporate technological initiatives. One of those has been the move away from more traditional business communication methods like e-mail (When did e-mail become traditional?) to micro blogging. It's been an interesting adventure. People are used to using micro blogging in a specific, very personal way. As we did our trial runs, I realized that there had to be a paradigm shift in thinking for people in the company to really get benefit out of it. The micro blog couldn't just be Twitter at work, where people sent companywide tweets about their dog or how much they like soda. There was an audience consideration, a concept that I first learned to apply outside of just written words in 3040. However, we also wanted to take full advantage of people's knowledge of this format

and its more open nature. I ended up helping to craft a “best practices” document for our micro blogging. Even though it’s a work in progress, there is a level of participation and information sharing happening now that we wouldn’t have gotten had we not gone through the struggles of embracing a new media genre.

I’m also involved in a media-heavy project as part of my master’s program in instructional technology and learning sciences. We are currently working on providing media as part of a quest to form an economic and cultural sister city relationship between Logan, Utah, and the Egyptian city of Faiyum. Our group is providing three types of media for Logan City to use. We’ve already produced a forty-five-minute PowerPoint presentation, with a unified design (thank you, graphic art majors!), that has tons of images and covers several important topics related to the proposed sister city relationship. We will also be working on a shorter video-style presentation as well as a short promotional YouTube video. It’s an exciting project that has a lot of considerations. Unlike my project in high school and in 3040, this project has a real client, and that client has expectations. It’s been a different experience trying to balance what I think looks and feels right for our message and the design and rhetorical limitations that get imposed for different groups on the client side. However, it looks like I will get the chance to pull out those old video-editing skills again!

#### HOW TO AVOID THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH VIDEO

Cheryl has learned numerous lessons from the English 3040 class and from repeated readings of Tia’s and Tyrell’s design justifications, as well as from the e-mail conversations they have had about writing this chapter and what each is currently working on. Here are the lessons learned:

- If you ask for five-paragraph videos, you will get five-paragraph videos. Focusing on a single, formulaic genre for the major project halts the critical progress of students who don’t already come with multimodal composition experience.
- Assigning the opposite of five-paragraph videos—that is, offering students the opportunity to compose completely open-ended assignments—may not be the answer. In fall 2007, Cheryl taught a similar class, English 239, Multimodal Composition, at Illinois State. To test out her “avoiding five-paragraph videos” theory, she gave students an open assignment and their final videos included multigenre texts that were creative (poems, music videos, memoirs, etc.) and persuasive (documentaries, mockumentaries,

sports-newscast features, visual arguments, etc.). The videos weren't perfect, and they exhibited the kinds of breaks and silences that help foster critical thinking that Jung called for her in multigenre scholarship. Overall Cheryl was pleased with the students' engagement with the open-assignment texts, but she was not wowed enough to be satisfied that the students were deeply engaging with the modes, media, and genres in a way that would be transferable to other learning situations.<sup>4</sup> She felt the syllabus needed more depth.

- The syllabus outlined here, which used assignment sequences that transitioned from linguistic to aural to visual to multiple modes of communication, had two problems: (1) it assumed students came to class with zero basic literacies in multimodal composition and thus needed that step-by-step work; and (2) it was too hurried to allow them time to compose and revise the larger, multigenre texts in enough depth.
- Avoiding scholarship in multimodal theory in a class on multimodality (as Cheryl did in that English 3040 class and also in her first multimodal composition class at Illinois State) is stupid.

All of these points, but especially that last one, are not wowful, eureka notions; they are embarrassing realizations. But the teaching-as-process portion of a Happenings pedagogy has helped her realize her mistakes and moves her away from a naïve and chaotic interpretation of avant-garde pedagogy toward a critical, socioepistemic pedagogy that still incorporates the expressivism inherent in new media composing.

Several years have passed, and the major assignment has changed again based on the lessons learned. Her fall 2008 class focused on the recent history and purpose of multimodal composition in the humanities, with a particular look at how students are portrayed or are given voice in new media scholarship.<sup>5</sup> The students composed three group projects that were multivoiced, multigenre, multimodal, and multimedia (whew!), in whatever combinations they deemed necessary, for submission to a digital, peer-reviewed publication.<sup>6</sup> Three weeks into class, after analyzing sample video calls-for-papers (CFPs) available on YouTube, the students insisted on producing ones that could be used for the digital publication to which they were submitting. The students spent less than an hour learning how to complete this impromptu assignment, including grabbing video from YouTube, finding images and tips on analyzing the written CFP they'd pull content from, and using MovieMaker.

They had five days to complete the one-minute CFPs, and a majority

of their first drafts were wowful. Those that didn't wow were still impressive, given the quickness of the project. Six weeks into class, Cheryl was amazed by their project pitches, which got at the heart of disciplinary conversations happening in digital-writing studies. By the end of the semester, the proposal the students submitted about their projects was accepted for publication. Cheryl has repeated that syllabus several times (with scholarly multimedia publication venues in rhetoric and composition being the primary audience), each time with similar success. While space limitations prevent detailing how this new syllabus is taught using a genre studies approach to multimodal composition (see Ball 2012), she can attest that the shifting nature of digital scholarship pushes students as authors to choose what modes, media, genres, and technologies they believe are needed to reach an audience of teacher-scholars invested in, but perhaps with much still to learn about, new media.

And there have been no more wowless, five-paragraph videos in her classes.

## NOTES

1. The first line of Geoffrey Sirc's book *English Composition as a Happening* (2002, 1) reads: "I suppose the reason none of us burn incense in our writing classes any more is because of the disk drives."

2. Some terms must be defined at this point. I draw on the New London Group's (NLG) definition of "mode" (Cope and Kalantzis 2000), which they refer to as "modes of meaning" but which I more often refer to as "modes of communication" because it makes sense more quickly to those not familiar with this area of scholarship. The modes that the NLG discuss include linguistic, visual, aural, spatial, and gestural, with multimodal including combinations of the other five modes.

Next is "medium" or "media," which draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) *Multimodal Discourse*. Although generalizing their complicated distinctions between modes and media, I use "media" to indicate how modes of communication are produced and distributed for public consumption (reading). For example, a linguistic mode of communication might be enacted through the medium of writing, which can also be a visual mode and could be transformed into an aural mode when writing is spoken instead of read on a page or screen. (I should note that Kress himself has said publicly—at his keynote at the 2011 Writing Research Across Borders conference in Fairfax, Virginia—that trying to create distinctions between "mode" and "medium" has become useless.)

“Text” refers to any possible combination of modes or media used to communicate to an audience and is recognized through specific genres, which are texts that use flexible, social conventions in response to a particular rhetorical situation. “Genres” use multiple modes and may use multiple media (e.g., a research paper that includes a graph or illustration; a documentary that uses textual overlay and voiceovers, etc.). “Media,” however, are genre-independent. The previous example of a linguistic mode of communication, writing, needs a generic container to hold it; otherwise, the writing remains a virtual text. The virtuality of the text thus requires an interface technology to display the medium, making it materially available to users (readers), which *can* be virtual—I am not intending to create a binary between virtual and material here; she simply does not have the space, or words, to get at what I am trying to say. Here’s a quick example: The medium of writing, which is an example of the linguistic mode, can be placed into a genre such as a letter to the editor, and published on interface technologies, or materials, including newsprint or a webpage.

A question I will pose, but leave mostly for another time, is: When does a technology change from being a medium of production or distribution to a convention of the genre, and thus (in some cases) a genre itself? For example, when a student uses blogging software to host a personal website in which she is posting personal pictures, writing daily entries for her family, and posting course assignments (including written reading responses and multimedia elements such as MP3s created for class), one cannot accurately assign a specific genre to such a blog because it covers so many topics for different audiences; a writer is blogging, which seems to be a production method, but it is one, like word processing, that can encompass several genres (class posts, family posts) and media (writing, pictures, MP3s) at once. That is, a “blog” is not a genre. Although blogs tend to impose specific conventions on the texts they contain (including the design of the blog itself), blogs are also a technological distribution method. So maybe the better question is: What is the impact on meaning making of the layered genre conventions of distribution methods? And does the meaning of the contained text change when the interface changes? On video blogging (or “vogs,” the term that the so-called father of vlogs, Adrian Miles, has called them), see <http://vogmae.net.au/vlog/2011/06/the-vogma-manifesto-2000/>.

3. Two examples of successful multigenre texts that students produced as part of coursework are discussed in Ball and Moeller 2007 and 2008.

4. One or two texts wowed me for sure—and in ways I wasn’t expecting to be wowed: There was one student who, instead of following instructions to film and edit similar visual elements (based on an earlier version of the video motif assignment posted at the WritingWithVideo.net website; see <http://www.writingwithvideo.net/curriculum/module-01>), created a motif in which he



filmed different scenes through dirty windows—a high level of critical thinking from a student who already had video-production experience. His motif, called “Most Epic Battle,” is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks8HLskwbJY>. Or the student who I thought had dropped the course but showed up with a completed, and beautifully done, antiwar music video two weeks before the semester ended. The other students insisted that I allow his video into the showcase even though he’d missed the class-wide voting.

5. The topic of digital scholarship was in part gifted to me through my work with the hosts of the 2008 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition. As coeditors for the digital book *The New Work of Composing* that came out of the conference, Debra Journet and Ryan Trauman wanted a video response to the conference itself in the book. The students attended the conference, conducted research, collected digital assets, and composed several pieces of digital scholarship for submission to the collection. Their submissions were reviewed by the editors (other than myself), accepted for publication, and peer-reviewed by the press’s external review board.

6. The syllabi for my Multimodal Composition classes (since 2008) are available at <http://www.ceball.com/classes/239>. Although conceived more in relation to my work with *Kairos*, this project is similar to what Ohio State University’s first-year writing program is doing in their Commonplace project (see <http://www.commonplaceuniversity.com/>). The major difference is that the peer-reviewers in my case are meant to be scholars, not other students.

## REFERENCES

- Ball, Cheryl E. 2012. “Assessing Scholarly Webtexts: A Rhetorical Genre-Studies Approach.” *Technical Communication Quarterly* 21: 61–77.
- Ball, Cheryl E., and Ryan M. Moeller. 2007. “Reinventing the Possibilities: Academic Literacy and New Media.” *Fibreculture Journal* 10. Online at <http://ten.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-062-reinventing-the-possibilities-academic-literacy-and-new-media/>.
- . 2008. “Converging the ASS[umptions] Between U and ME; or How New Media Can Bridge a Scholarly/Creative Split in English Studies.” *Computers and Composition Online*. Online at <http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/convergence/>.
- Berlin, James. 1988. “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” *College English* 50: 477–94.
- Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis, eds. 2000. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. New York: Routledge.

- Journet, Debra, Cheryl E. Ball, and Ryan Trauman, eds. 2012. *The New Work of Composing*. Computers and Composition Digital Press at Utah State University Press. Online at <http://ccdigitalpress.org/nwc>.
- Jung, Julie. 2005. *Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. 2001. *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. New York: Arnold.
- Peterson, Sheri E., ed. 2009–10. *Utah State University General Catalog*. Online at <http://www.usu.edu/generalcatalog/2009-2010/online/>.
- Russell, David. 1995. "Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction." In *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, edited by Joseph Petraglia, 51–78. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Shipka, Jody. 2005. "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing." *College Composition and Communication* 57: 277–306.
- Sirc, Geoffrey. 2002. *English Composition as a Happening*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Smit, David W. 2004. *The End of Composition Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sullivan, Patricia. 2001. Practicing Safe Visual Rhetoric on the World Wide Web. *Computers and Composition* 18: 103–21.
- Wardle, Elizabeth. 2009. "'Mutt Genres' and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?" *College Composition and Communication* 60: 765–89.

Relevant work in multimodal document design includes WIP (Wahlster et al., 1991, 1993), COMET (Feiner and McKeown, 1990), Mittal et al. (1995), and Kerpedjiev et al. (1997). All these approaches have in common the recognition that graphical design is as purposeful as verbal activity: thus, approaches to language generation based on communicative goals could be extended to include graphical presentation. In GeM, therefore, we plan to treat genres not as discrete sets of constraints but as representative of a point in a multidimensional genre space. This will allow convergences and divergences between genres to be represented and generated, and will support the exploration of any potential document genre within the space.