“Functional, Critical, Rhetorical: A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies in the Composition Classroom”

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Stuart Selber: Multiliteracies for a Digital Age
Selber’s Problem Space

“Many in the profession are understandably skeptical about getting involved in computer literacy initiatives” (2).

“Still others—the great majority of teachers, I would argue—are encouraged, even mandated, to integrate technology into the curriculum, yet no incentives are given for such an ambitious assignment, one that places an extra workload burden on teachers, adding considerably to their overall job activities” (2).

“I urge teachers of writing and communication to adopt a ‘postcritical’ stance, one that locates computer literacy in the domain of English studies while operating under the assumption that no theories or positions should be immune to critical assessment.”
Selber’s Obstacles to More Productive Literary Practices (1)

Technology Myths

- Computer technologies are all too often touted as the magic solution to all of our problems
- Computers level the educational playing field
- Computers automatically make people more productive
Pedagogical Impediments

- Teachers of writing are often not consulted during the process of designing computer-supported writing environments.
- Academic-industrial partnerships require considerable attention because they have the capacity to commercialize online spaces in ways that are incompatible with the goals of a liberal education.
Argument For a Postcritical Stance

“In sum, if teachers fail to adopt a postcritical stance, thus leaving technology design and education to those outside the field, it is entirely probable that students will have a much more difficult time understanding computers in critical, conceptual, and historical ways; that technology designs, informed by pedagogical and cultural values not our own, will define and redefine literacy practices in ways that are less than desirable; and that computer literacy initiatives will simply serve to perpetuate rather than alleviate existing social inequities” (13).
What Does Multiliteracy Look Like?
“The key is for teachers to develop a disciplinary approach that is not too prescriptive, one that is generative and directive while acknowledging the fact that every specific instructional situation may very well call for a unique solution, or at least one that accounts for local social forces and material conditions. For teachers of writing and communication who work in departments of English... such a challenge can be a source of considerable confusion and apprehension. But it does not have to be so” (23).
# Conceptual Landscape of a Computer Multiliteracies Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Subject Position</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional Literacy</td>
<td>Computers as tools</td>
<td>Students as <strong>users</strong> of</td>
<td>Effective employment</td>
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<td>technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Literacy</td>
<td>Computers as cultural artifacts</td>
<td>Students as <strong>questioners</strong> of technology</td>
<td>Informed critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Literacy</td>
<td>Computers as hypertextual media</td>
<td>Students as <strong>producers</strong> of technology</td>
<td>Reflective praxis</td>
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1. Functional Literacy

“So although functionally literate students may be equipped for effective computer-based work, such work will remain obsequious and underdeveloped without the richly textured insights that critical perspectives can provide” (73).

Five parameters:

1. Educational Goals
2. Social Conventions
3. Specialized Discourses
4. Management Activities
5. Technological Impasses
2. Critical Literacy

“Students who are critically literate are alert to the fact that computers can be dangerous, although their attentiveness is neither superficial nor unfocused. To put it another way, students should be able to recognize and articulate the ways power circulates in technological contexts” (133).

Four parameters:

1. Design Cultures
2. Use Contexts
3. Institutional Forces
4. Popular Representations
3. Rhetorical Literacy

“Rhetorical literacy concerns the design and evaluation of online environments; thus students who are rhetorically literate can effect change in technological systems” (182).

Four parameters:

1. Persuasion
2. Deliberation
3. Reflection
4. Social Action
Putting it All Together

“Students should not be just effective users of computers, nor should they be just informed questioners. Although these two roles are essential, neither one encourages a sufficient level of participation. In order to function most effectively as agents of change, students must also become reflective producers of technology, a role that involves a combination of functional and critical abilities” (182).
How Do We Apply Multiliteracies *Beyond* Computers?
ENG 100:
Who I Am/Why I Am/Where I Am
## Conceptual Landscape of a Self-Exploration Multiliteracies Program (ENG 100)

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<td><strong>Functional Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Self as product of experiences</td>
<td>Students as <strong>consumers</strong> of influential experiences</td>
<td>Effective narrative story-telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Self as hegemonically and ideology shaped by experiences</td>
<td>Students as <strong>questioners</strong> their own beliefs and attitudes</td>
<td>Informed self-critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhetorical Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Self as situated within discourse communities in the world</td>
<td>Students as <strong>producers</strong> of contributions to a larger conversation</td>
<td>Reflective praxis</td>
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ENG 100: Who I Am/Why I Am/Where I Am

From my syllabus:

You will begin the semester writing about what you know and you will explore your experiences, ideas, and values through writing. This course encourages you to examine what you think and why you think as you do. By writing about your own interests, experiences, and identities, you have an opportunity to write with authority; with the confidence this builds, you should become more willing to explore what you think and feel about yourself and the world around you. By the time the last third of the semester arrives, you should be ready to move beyond writing about yourself and ready to incorporate outside sources into your third composition.
This paper will seem strange to you; you’ve probably never written anything like it before. We’re going to write using snapshots. Snapshots don’t use transitions and they are creatively written. I want this paper to explore the handful of significant experiences in your life that make you who you are. These reflections can be from childhood, adolescence, your high school careers, first impressions of college and people whom you’ve met or would like to meet, and/or visions of your future. In high school, you probably wrote five paragraph essays, and most of those essays were likely about topics which you were not invested. In this paper, I want your life experiences. This is your biography, one snapshot at a time.
Project 2: Position Shift Narrative (Critical Literacy)

This essay asks you to focus on a single experience or set of experiences in your life. The focus of the essay should revolve around a personal experience that altered how you thought or felt about an issue, idea, belief, etc. Reflection on the experience(s) and what it/they mean(s) to you should play as strong a role as memory. By focusing on one event or one group of related events, you can begin to acclimate yourself to examining your life through writing. You should write about some time in your life when you had a “shift” (change in position or way of thinking) about a certain issue that is very important to you. The possibilities for this topic are as wide as your experiences. Just make certain that you choose to write about something that is important to you and that has played a major role in shaping who you are and how you think.
Project 3: Writing Beyond the Personal (Rhetorical Literacy)

This paper serves as a segue to the type of researched writing you’ll be focusing on next semester in ENG 200. The ideas you bring to this paper will extend beyond your personal experience. At this point in the semester you should be ready to write about something other than where you’ve already been. Topics will be negotiated with each of you and should focus on a topic of personal interest that you truly want to explore.

You will be expected to use at least three outside sources that could include a combination of personal interviews, questionnaires, online sources, and/or print sources. But dig this: you can’t use two sources from the same medium. Meaning, you’ll need to mix it up. You should also strongly consider including images to enhance your print text (but remember, they won’t contribute to your overall page count).
Project 4: Rip It Up and Start Again (Rhetorical Literacy)

Radical Revision pulls in all of the tools you have used throughout the semester. It allows you the freedom to “start over” with an earlier paper and revamp it using the knowledge you have gained throughout the semester. The multimedia element allows you to consider a piece you may have thought was finished in a new way and opens up new possibilities. You can change any of your three compositions into another type of art/media. You can do any of the following or make up your own: create a painting, poem, song, skit, drawing, or video, or rewrite one of your three papers from someone else’s point of view. Maybe you rework your snapshots paper as a video. Maybe you remediate your position shift essay as a graphic novel or a magazine. The key word here is radical. There should be nearly no recognizable pieces of your previous work left intact.
ENG 200:
Gender, Race, and Class in Media
Rhetorical messages have surrounded us from birth and we can choose either to let them sway us as passive audience members or to recognize their power and think deeply about what these messages mean and how they affect us. We are all rhetorically shaped (and manipulated) by media. But there is power and agency in understanding how you are being shaped, exploring why a given message might have chosen a particular strategy, and finding rhetorically effective ways to push back against the messages you find problematic. We will work towards empowering you to affect change in the world around you by critically analyzing the media that affect you every day. To this end, our course will lead you through three units to help you see yourself first as a media consumer; second as a media critic; and third as a media producer.
## Conceptual Landscape of a Media Multiliteracies Program (ENG 200)

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<td>Media as product</td>
<td>Students as <strong>consumers</strong> of media</td>
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<td>Critical Literacy</td>
<td>Media as hegemonic influencer and shaper of ideology</td>
<td>Students as <strong>questioners</strong> of media</td>
<td>Informed critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Literacy</td>
<td>Media as a means of effecting change in the world</td>
<td>Students as <strong>producers</strong> of media</td>
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Project 1: Snapshot Media Narrative (Functional Literacy)

To get our feet underneath us and better recognize and understand the media-saturated world we live in, this first project will ask you to reflect on your own experiences with media. It will ask you to consider what books, TV shows, characters, magazines, movies, corporations, advertisements (anything, really) have influenced you throughout your life. You will write a series of snapshots or scenes in close detail with dialogue and context about different important and pivotal moments in your media life. These will be mini stories and moments in time; they will be small pieces of your life with media. You will explore your own personal media narrative; you will “think outside the box” with new writing strategies; you will start understanding the role media has played in your life; you might even find it fun and insightful.
Project 2: Rhetorical Analysis of an Advertising Example (Critical Literacy)

Here is where you try out some academic writing. You will choose any advertising example, and you will work both to summarize and then to analyze it. You will push yourself to answer the questions 1) what is this example doing, 2) how is it doing that, and finally, 3) why does it matter? You will conduct research concerning your example and the ongoing conversations surrounding your topic and your angle of analysis. We will read examples from the book and analyze which strategies are the most effective for making your argument. You will break your case-study example down, and you will make a research-informed analysis of some element of pop culture media. In the meantime, you will learn some rhetorical approaches and strategies for writing analysis papers in the future.
Project 3: Media Activism Campaign (Rhetorical Literacy)

For your final project, you will explore what happens when citizens push back or revolt against “mainstream” media messages. You are going to choose a hegemonic/ideological message that the mass media perpetuates in film, TV, social media, advertising, books, pop culture, news media (anything, really) that you disagree with, hate, are angered by, are troubled by, find insulting, or are indignant about. You are going to research where that message comes from, how it spreads, who perpetuates it, and what campaigns already exist out there that comment on this issue. Then you are going to create your own set of texts (in any genre and to any audience that you deem the most rhetorically appropriate) that challenges and pushes back against these media messages. You are going to make a stand for whatever cause you feel passionate about, use all of the rhetorical skill we have been building, target a specific audience, and create texts that are geared toward countering problematic hegemonic messages.
Benefits of a Multiliteracies Approach to Composition

For the student:

- Students enter into unfamiliar concepts using their own experiences as a gateway
- Students establish their own voice and right to speak before taking on critical analysis
- Students gain agency to join the conversation on topics that are important to them
- Students use rhetorical tools to affect change in the real world
- Students see composition as a powerful tool that is applicable to their own lives
Benefits of a Multiliteracies Approach to Composition

For the teacher:

- Curriculum is non-prescriptive, which fosters learning *alongside* students rather than lecturing *to* students.
- Each project is naturally scaffolded with the ones that precede it, giving the semester an inherent progression.
- Because student topics are wide-ranging, class discussion and exercises can lead to surprising and often generative insights.
- You take on a role as facilitator, mentor, and encourager rather than a punishing figure with a heavy red pen.
Questions? Comments? Concerns?