

## From First-Year Composition to Second-Year Multiliteracies: Integrating Instruction in Oral, Written, and Visual Communication at a Technological University

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### BACKGROUND

The fascination the New London Group has for compositionists these days certainly circles around the Group's strongly voiced arguments that literacy instruction needs to change in response to the new global economy and its social and cultural effects. Changes we are experiencing in all our living spaces—the spaces of work, civic life, and home—necessitate, the Group argues, rethinking what we mean by literacy and how we should approach developing students' communication abilities in addition to reading and writing. "The increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on . . ." in particular, occasioned the New London Group's decision to form, meet, and discuss how we—teachers and administrators of communication programs<sup>1</sup>—should realign what we do in school with the new contexts of communication (Cope and Kalantzis 5). The outcome of those meetings is something of a pedagogical manifesto whose emphasis on multimodality gives focused voice to what many in composition and communication have already been considering and discussing.

Of course the call to redesign how we teach communication skills is not new. As John Heyda, Diana George and John Trimbur, and Stephen Mailloux have reminded us, in the late 1940s and 1950s we heard a similar call in response to that era's rapidly changing social and economic world—and academia responded to the call by forming the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, with its journal, *CCC*) and by developing communication courses designed to bring speaking and writ-

ing (and sometimes reading and listening) together in one course or curriculum. That effort lasted nearly a decade and a half, and though it spread widely across the country, by the early 1960s it had mostly faded from view. It is hard to say that such communication courses failed, given the longevity and extent of the movement, but the movement clearly did not take hold with the institutional tenacity that, say, first-year composition courses have enjoyed.

Heyda, George and Trimbur, and Mailloux agree that the main reason the communication courses disappeared was disciplinary. According to Mailloux, the effort was doomed from the start because the national organizations representing speech communication and composition (the Speech Association of America [SAA, now the National Communication Association] and the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE]) were unable to find a way to merge, create strong, substantial ties, or at least define the communications course as a common project worthy of joint organizational investment. Organizations not only reflect the interests—and as George and Trimbur point out, the “sensibilities” (690)—of their members, but they also project a field of relatively integrated research projects, and thus the inability of the SAA and NCTE to institute collaboration on the communications course effectively marginalized research that might have supported the course and strengthened its theoretical base. True, the *CCC* journal published articles by both speech communication and composition faculty, and the *CCCC* brought them together for a few days each year, but the disciplinary gulf is everywhere evident in the pages of the journal during the 1950s, with few people even aware of the need to face their differences, historic and otherwise. (Our favorite example of ships passing in the night is the February 1958 issue that has, side by side, an article on “The Seven Sins of Technical Writing” and another by Marshall McLuhan on mass communication in a global society [Freedman; McLuhan].)

Another reason the communication courses faded was that teachers were unable to develop the courses theoretically and pedagogically beyond their earliest formations. Proponents of the course had begun their work grounded in the belief that speaking and writing belong together and hence can easily be taught together because they share a “general semantics”: S. Stewart Gordon, for example, writes in a 1956 *CCC* article titled “Recent Developments in Communications Courses” that “[a]s we all know, one of the basic arguments for the communication course is that the likenesses within skills are basic and the differences are superficial” (14). This belief sustained the communication course because it provided the reason for the course being able to exist in the first place—but this belief then also prevented those involved with it from seeing a need to develop any more complex understanding of multimodal communication. The New London Group, to their credit, has a more sophisticated understanding of language

as social action and a stronger grasp on how difficult integration of the modes can be; specifically, they combine the rich history and language of design with notions of genre and meaning-making (semiotics) in order to define an active pedagogy (a new understanding of literacy) that positions students to use and transform the genres of school, workplace, and civic sphere.

If there is a problem with the call issued by the New London Group to teachers of communication, though, it may be its failure to address the disciplinary dynamics many instructors will face trying to enact the principles of “multiliteracy” in any meaningful or comprehensive way. The Group’s own examples of the new pedagogy in action, for instance, are drawn either from individual classrooms converted to the new ways (the same model used in the 1950s), or from new programs or centers whose institutional role or place is not always clearly explained. In neither case, however, do the authors address potential institutional resistance to their pedagogy nor the problems that can arise for instructors who remain tied to the academic histories that produced the current division of labor and the instructional isolation of the modes. The experience of the 1950s teaches us the importance of institutional location and disciplinary exchange to the success of curricular experiments such as the New London Group propose, and that means special attention to the concept of “integration,” that is, to the way the disciplines historically responsible for speech, composition, visual communication, and so on are actually and not just theoretically brought together.

In what follows we describe a new curriculum we recently implemented at Michigan Technological University (MTU) that tries, again, to “[r]e-unit[e] the language arts” (23), as Mailloux names the process. We set out to integrate not only oral and written communication but also visual communication, given how the design of electronic technologies call the visual aspects of all our texts to our attentions, as we see in student work and as the New London Group and so many others acknowledge (Faigley; Bolter; George and Trimbur; Trimbur; etc.). Given our readings into what happened with the communication course in the 1950s and 1960s, we knew the effort to combine the oral, written, and visual into one course would not be easy, and it hasn’t been . . . but because of our readings we also went into the process with some awareness of the disciplinary, theoretical, and practical tensions into which we might get strung. Our awareness of the particularities of our specific school and department (we are in a Humanities department, for example, with faculty in the areas of rhetoric and composition, communications, visual studies, literacy, linguistics, philosophy, literature, modern languages, and cultural studies) also very much shaped our designings, and so we cannot—of course—offer the following description of our course as a model for all to follow. At best our course is what the New London Group calls an “available design”—part of a repertoire of

emerging curricula and pedagogies available as resources for others who are redesigning curricula in response to demands being placed on our schools by legislatures, accrediting agencies, changing demographics, privatization, the effects of globalization, and new communications technologies.

### THE COURSE: EXTERNAL PUSHES TO GENESIS

We wish we could say that the course we'll be describing below came solely from our own initiatives, our own responses to our readings and research, and our perceived needs within our institution. If it had not been for external forces, however, we would probably still be offering—in line with our university's requirements of several years ago—two first-year ten-week (that is, quarter-long) composition classes and one ten-week speech class (required for many students on campus and to be taken, generally, early in a student's undergraduate career). That we now offer one second-year, semester-long communications course—called *Revisions: Oral, Visual, and Written Communication*—is as much a result of changes in the university as of our beliefs about the work students need now to be doing. We start with the outside impetus to our changes because its reasons provide us several lessons about how we need to make our courses and practices present within the university's structures.

In 1998, the external forces took very specific shape on our campus. The North Central Accreditation (NCA) association had assessed our then-general education program and found it neither “coherent” nor “integrated” enough. NCA and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) were shifting from requiring students to take a specific number of credits in communication courses to requiring outcomes-based assessment; this was to be fully implemented in 2000-2001. Dropping retention rates for first-year students at MTU brought discussions of how to make students' initial college experiences more engaging, with talk of “learning communities” and “cohorts.” And we were shifting from quarters to semesters. In response to this particular commingling of forces and concerns, MTU's administration moved an associate dean into a position of new power with considerable resources for reconceiving the university's general education program—in a very short time. Starting in the summer of 1998, the newly-formed general education taskforce, composed of faculty from across campus and under the close direction of the former assistant dean, was given eight months to absorb the latest national thinking on general education, respond to NCA's criticisms of the university's program, and design a new program that would fit the university's mission, student needs, and the new outcomes assessment models;<sup>2</sup> the new program was to be put up for faculty vote of approval in 1999 and—if the program were approved—1999-2000 was to be a transition year for working out the concrete details with full implementation woven into the coming semesters in 2000-2001. All this happened.

The Taskforce began by defining a grounding philosophy and mission statement for general education at MTU. The statement of philosophy contains all one would expect:

In our General Education program, faculty and students cultivate intellectual values essential to the practice of democracy: respect for others, desire to engage in constructive discourse, clear reasoning and communication, and careful and balanced analysis. Students learn to understand, value, and negotiate individual, intellectual, and cultural difference, and to recognize and understand the significance of historical, social, and environmental context. Every graduate should understand the diverse modes of inquiry that distinguish the sciences, humanities, social sciences and professions, and should acquire a broad knowledge of the world's intellectual, spiritual, and artistic traditions. Together, these elements prepare graduates who can work with others to improve their communities, their societies, and their world. ("MTU's General Education Curriculum")

Within the context of the other outside forces motivating this new-to-MTU philosophy, the process of turning the philosophy into concrete curriculum threw into the air all that had seemed fixed.

For example, the move from credit-based to outcomes-based requirements from the various accrediting associations resulted in scrambles over where required credit-hours could and would be placed, running the humanities department headlong into conflict with credit-hour-hungry technical programs on our campus. It was as though the outreach work we had done earlier to promote the importance of written and oral communication on our campus had never happened: we took part in discussions where engineering faculty (for example) argued that, because composition has no content and because communication courses were no longer specifically mandated by our various accrediting boards, they should fold the teaching of writing into their courses, taught solely by them—as long as they were given more credit hours for their curriculum. There was also the issue of graduate students being the instructors of record for the composition classes we offered under semesters: because the model of graduate student teaching in the technical departments on our campus is one of exam grading and overseeing labs, many faculty across campus did not believe that having undergraduate students take their first college courses from graduate students would give undergraduates the initial rich intellectual experience that many argue contributes to the retention and successful college careers of undergraduates.

As a result of those perceptions coming out in the time of critical and quick change, we now, in calmer moments and preparing for future moves toward change, try to make more concerted efforts to inform others across campus about the “content-full” disciplines of composition and communication and about the pedagogical training and support given to graduate students in the Rhetoric and Technical Communication (RTC) program housed in the humanities department; we also try to get others to see RTC graduate students in action as teachers and researchers. In the hurried midst of the taskforce discussions, however, we argued and persuaded and convinced others of the centrality of our—faculty and graduate student—work to the general education of students in technical fields. We took the situation as an opening into possibility: based on the work many in our department had already been doing with integrating the modes of communication within individual classes and on our readings in the work of the New London Group and other writers such as Trimbur, George, Cornbleet, and Carter, for example, and based also on our knowledge of the needs of students in the technical fields on our campus—and of the perceptions of many faculty in those fields—we proposed a course centered, practically, on direct instruction in the mixed communication modes of the oral, written, and visual.

Before we describe the specifics of this course, we need to show it to you in the context of the general education curriculum that resulted from the Taskforce’s work. The outcome of the eight-month design process (what many on the committee jokingly referred to as “just-in-time” curriculum development) was a four-course general education core curriculum:

- a first-year, first-semester, small seminar called Perspectives on Inquiry, to be taught only by faculty, who are to come from all departments across campus. (In day to day practice, the class has been taught by faculty primarily from the humanities and social sciences departments as well as by a fair number of part-time adjuncts whose pay comes out of other departments and is subsidized by the university. There are faculty from various departments who have found this to be a wonderful class to teach and who are strongly committed to it.)
- a first-year, second-semester large lecture course on world cultures
- a second-year, moderately sized course concerned with social, cultural, political, and economic institutions
- a second-year, small section course—Revisions: Oral, Visual, and Written Communication (hereafter referred to as Revisions)—providing direct instruction in communication, taught mostly by

graduate students from the RTC program located in the humanities department.

The general education curriculum also has a loosely structured upper-division distribution requirement of 15 credit hours, in which students take classes from two out of five areas of focus (language, thought, and value; aesthetics and creativity; histories and cultures; science, technology, and society; economic, political, and social institutions).

Students are to begin working on their speaking, writing, and visual skills in the small first-semester seminars taught by faculty from across campus; they are then to build on that with direct instruction in the second-year small communications course that we proposed and designed.

### THE COURSE: DESIGN

In accord with the philosophy of general education on our campus, the main objective of the course we developed—Revisions—is to help students increase their civic agency by helping them strengthen their communication practices. Although the other core courses in the general education program are also supposed to stress the differing modes of communication, only in Revisions do students receive instruction informed by the disciplines traditionally responsible for studying and teaching communication; it is only in the Revisions courses that students have a consistent and prolonged opportunity to observe, learn about, and reflect overtly on their own and others' communication practices, as well as to learn techniques for intervening in their own processes of communication with the aim of improving them.

The core group that originally designed Revisions—three humanities faculty whose work focuses, respectively, in rhetoric and composition, speech communication and cultural studies, and rhetoric and visual and digital communication, along with one graduate student who served as a paid assistant to the director of writing programs in humanities—designed the course in stages. We began the design work with the core general education goals outlined above. Then, in discussions with other faculty and with the graduate students who would primarily be teaching the course, we developed more specific goals and objectives—tied to the three modes of communication—and then developed a general outline of the course; the core group then (over one summer) developed a central assignment sequence, specific activities, and teaching materials and gathered readings and other support materials for the class that was taught for the first time in the fall of 2000.

Knowing that it had been problematic for communications classes in the 1950s to approach the different modes of communication as though they shared a “general semiotic,” the core group worked to have the course

incorporate the differing and complex approaches to communication that have developed around the oral, visual, and written—and yet we also did not want to offer students a disjunct course consisting of five weeks on speech, five weeks on visual communication, and then five weeks on writing. Instead, we want students to understand that only in rare (and usually artificial) communication circumstances are these three modes separated from each other; we want them to understand how (for example) processes of discussion, in class and in other social circumstances, feed into and circle about writing, or that writing on screen or paper always involves making rhetorical decisions about visual presentation, and so on; we want them to understand that the conventions of presentation—whether oral, visual, or written—are indeed conventions, which can be learned by careful observation and which require thoughtful and aware modification for particular audiences and circumstances. In developing Revisions, therefore, we decided to use a rhetorical approach as an overarching framework for aligning but respecting the three different modes: by encouraging students always to be alert to particular audiences and particular communicative contexts as they make choices about which modes to use and how to use them, we hope that students will be comfortable and fluid in moving between and among the differing abilities and practices asked by the differing modes.

Here then are the goals—admittedly very ambitious—that we developed for the course. We started by developing overarching goals for the course and then pulled specific goals from our disciplinary backgrounds, subservient to the overall goals of the course, and we did so mindful of the need to embed the goals in activities that stress integration across the modes.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Overarching Goals of Revisions**

In this class students will:

- acquire a wide repertoire of oral, written, and visual communication strategies and tools
- assess different communicative contexts in order to decide which media, strategies, and tools are appropriate for the situation and audience
- develop a range of strategies for effectively giving and getting feedback and for assessing their own communicative products
- learn the possibilities of and necessity for revision as a strategy for achieving specific communicative goals



## Specific Goals of Revisions

In considering all three modes of communication, students will learn how to:

- be attentive—as communicators and as audience—to the ethical dimensions of different kinds of communication
- choose appropriate communication genres for differing contexts.
- choose the medium or media of communication appropriate for a specific context
- do the research necessary for, develop, and present formal academic texts
- analyze the argumentative structures of different media, and develop appropriate argumentative structures for the texts they produce
- elicit useful feedback from others
- revise texts in response to audience feedback
- revise a research question in response to a developing argument.
- develop and revise texts for audiences of differing interests and abilities
- use processes of reflection, review, and assessment
- recognize that many perspectives and arguments can be developed from any collection of information
- make explicit and question assumptions—cultural, temporal, and personal—that underlie the communication practices they have learned
- learn small group decision-making strategies
- cope with and make practical use of the anxiety that often accompanies having to be a communicator

## Goals Relating Specifically to Oral, Written, and Visual Communication

This class will help students learn the following vocabulary, concepts, and practices specific to the three modes of communication addressed in the class.

### *Oral*

- discussion formats (for example, how different sizes of groups lead to different kinds of group interaction)
- strategies for planning informal and formal group discussions

- listening: active listening; vocabulary for listening; how to facilitate different kinds of listening in an audience
- interviewing: relational adaptation; understanding how to formulate questions and elicit useful responses; drawing data out of an interview
- the parts of a speech
- modifying writing for oral presentations
- oral delivery strategies
- narrativity in speeches
- oral/aural Strategies

### *Written*

- the writing process: recognizing that there is a process; learning to analyze and troubleshoot one's own writing process
- the distinction between writing and editing
- editing for different purposes (i.e., editing for brevity versus variety, etc.)
- the distinction between an argument and the presentation of the argument
- transitions in writing
- citations and bibliographies, according to differing academic standards
- writing as choices of words, ethos, tone, style, etc.
- voice and style

### *Visual*

- conventions of layouts for differing contexts: how they develop and learning how to recognize them
- testing visual layouts with audiences
- typefaces: categories and conventional uses
- using words and images together
- basic conventions of layout
- using, interpreting, and composing photographs, charts, and graphs
- making effective overheads: color, type, and arrangement considerations
- visual style
- materials for different kinds of visual presentations

From the beginning we cautioned ourselves against hubris by admitting that in any given classroom we will undoubtedly fall short of achieving all our stated goals. We articulated such a broad range of goals, however, in order to keep ourselves mindful of the challenges of integrating the modes—a challenge that our students (like us) face daily in our quotidian practices—and to make sure we keep the three modes of communication in balance. The question of balance is of course a tricky one, depending on the course and program. It was our decision to strike an equal balance between all three modes, in part because the course was no longer defined by the university as a writing course, or even primarily as a writing course.

To facilitate the work instructors and students do studying communication against the background of civic participation and to make sure we addressed our goals as consciously and fully as possible, we laid the course out in five sections. As you look through this sequence, we hope you get a sense of how we tried to give separate but equal weight to each mode—and then to include assignments that steer students toward reflecting on how the modes and the respective vocabularies and concepts merge, overlap, alternate, and flow into each other. In addition, our structure draws on how the New London Group integrates four kinds of teaching into the multimodal approach they advocate: they call these approaches to teaching “situated practice,” “overt instruction,” critical framing,” and “transformed practice.” Without putting too heavy a hand on it, we shaped the central assignment sequence in the Revisions course around these four moments, the idea being that working across communication modes requires each of these experiential, conceptual, critical, and transformative approaches to learning. Here, finally, is the structure of the course, planned for a fifteen-week semester:

1. An introductory three weeks called “Emergent Strategies” that introduces students to the concept of civic participation in their own lives and communities, explores aspects of written, oral, and visual communication (and the connections between them) by asking students to develop a literacy narrative in which they consider how they have been shaped as communicators across the modes. This section also begins the process of teaching students basic rhetorical concepts and the various languages used to support the study of writing, speech, and visual design.
2. A three-week section titled “Communication in Context: Initial Research and Analysis” in which the class chooses a set of national or international civic advocacy groups to study in depth. The class, in small groups, conducts archival, library, and online research to develop a collection of materials for the groups being studied (Web pages, videos, brochures, printed or taped speeches, photographs,

magazines, yearly reports, organizational charts, histories, mission statements, etc.); while collecting this data the class also begins learning strategies for analyzing different media and modes of communication.

3. A five-week section titled “Communication in Context: A Critical Research and Analysis Project,” during which students learn more about relationships among audience, context, and purpose in communication in order to analyze the data collected and produce (write and revise) a five- to seven-page academic critical analysis research paper. Students also prepare and deliver an individual, formal, oral (persuasive) presentation. The paper and oral presentation both make arguments about what appears to be effective—or not—in the communication practices of the group(s) studied by the class.
4. A four-week section titled “Communicating with Community: Making Use of Analysis,” in which the students (in small groups) apply their research from the preceding section to develop documents that they think might be useful to one of the organizations they studied. Doing the work of this section, students have developed Web pages for teenagers, brochures for an international audience, games for parents and children, oral presentation for elders, fundraising events, and public service announcements for television. During the weeks of this section, teachers work to help students move from analysis to production—and students describe enjoying “making things” that can be of use in the world.
5. The final week is given over to assessing the class, both formally and individually: students reflect on what they learned, assess their own work, and the work and effectiveness of the class. (We also have been piloting a direct measure assessment tool, which takes the somewhat standard form of a kind of pre- and post-test).

In support of the goals and the course structure, the first year we taught Revisions all instructors used four books:

- John Trimbur’s *A Call to Write*
- Robin Williams’s *The Nondesigner’s Design Book*
- Tracey L. Smith and Mary Tague-Busler’s *Icebreaker: A Manual for Public Speaking*
- A reader we compiled for the course and had custom published. The reader includes an eclectic range of work contributed by faculty grounded across the modes; among the writings are:
  - excerpts from Bellah (et al)’s *The Pursuit of Happiness*,

- Lakoff’s chapters “We, The Jury” and “Language, Politics, and Power” from her book *Talking Power*
- Christensen’s article “Every Student Teaches and Every Teacher Learns”
- Blair and Michel’s article “Commemorating the Theme Park Zone: Reading the Astronaut’s Memorial”
- Foss and Foss’s chapter “Inviting Transformation” from their book *Inviting Transformations: Presentational Speaking for a Changing World*
- Kinross’s article “The Rhetoric of Neutrality”
- Kostelnick and Roberts’s chapter on “Rhetorical Background” from their textbook *Designing Visual Language*
- McCloud’s chapter “Show and Tell” from his book *Understanding Comics*
- Siple’s article “The Cultural Patterns of Deaf People”
- Schriver’s chapter “How Documents Engage Readers’ Thinking and Feeling” from her *Dynamics in Document Design* textbook

These pieces derive from the areas of speech communication, rhetoric and cultural studies, visual studies, art and design history, and popular culture, and they are intended to fill gaps in and between the more traditional speech, composition, and design textbooks we also used. In response to students’ mostly financial complaints, and as we developed more of our own materials, we dropped the speech text during the first year and Trimbur’s text the second year; we have kept *The Nondesigner’s Design Book* (students as well as faculty across campus respond well to its straightforward and informal approach to basic visual composition and typography), and we have thickened the course reader by adding sections on speech, rhetoric, civic advocacy, and ethics and communication.

The broad range of readings has turned out to be a strength for Revisions: the readings help teachers help students make connections across the areas of communication; compare—and weave together or keep separate—terminologies from speech, composition, and visual studies; and see ideas and concepts in both everyday and unusual applications. The readings also range from highly accessible to more theoretically dense; instructors order the readings to support their particular approaches to arranging the class. For instance, in the first few weeks of class, when students are just beginning to get their feet wet, some instructors choose to catch students’ attention by using McCloud’s piece because it has the appeal of being written in the comic book genre—but the piece also argues that there are categorizable ways words and visual representations can be related together on a

page and it provides terminology for talking about the word-visual representation relation, and so the piece also demonstrates how complex analysis can be structured and presented in modes other than those to which students are academically accustomed. The piece thus also leads naturally into activities in which students explore how words and visual representations function together and how visual arguments can be made by analytically trying out McCloud's categories. Other instructors prefer to begin with Kinross's "The Rhetoric of Neutrality" in combination with Stephen Katz's analysis of Nazi technical communication documents: the two pieces both argue that what we might have learned is neutral and without effect on us in pieces of communication—the visual aspects of even the most mundane texts in the Kinross article, the technical efficiency of memos in the Katz article—is in fact ethically charged and rhetorically complex; this is a fine way for students to begin thinking about the effects of the choices they make across the range of communications they produce.

As our short discussion of the readings indicates, there is necessary room in Revisions for instructors to modify the materials to fit their interests and strengths and the interests and strengths of different classes of students. In the past year, for example, the graduate student teachers of Revisions have given themes to their sections of the class, themes such as computer technologies or environmental concerns about water and land. In addition, classes choose widely differing civic advocacy groups to study. We have discovered, however and happily, that as classes move through the semester, sections that began in different ways tend to converge because, no matter how the class begins or how the civic advocacy groups are chosen, the production of papers and speeches and the final projects keep classes on the same track. This is necessary for ensuring that the goals of the course are being met consistently, to maintain a coherent connection to the rest of the general education program, and for purposes of assessment.

Before moving forward, we should address a concern raised by our insistence on integrating instruction in the modes and keeping attention to them balanced in time and importance. How is it possible, we might ask, to offer effective, direct instruction in each of these modes? Put otherwise, is it not the case that much writing instruction is necessarily being sacrificed in the construction of this course? The answer is both simple and complicated. Yes, we did not design the course as a "traditional" composition course—or as one model calls it, a "Comp Plus" course. And as a result, for instance, there is only enough time to draft and revise one long paper, which means that a student's experience with revising writing will be limited. But we are not alone in this regard, for what many in the field mean by "composition" is changing in many different ways. We pushed for balance between the modes, then, because we felt responsible for the wide range of texts students

are being asked to take in every day, and for the kinds of critical analytical skills they need to address these new media. We should add that—just as we do not expect in any single-term composition class to turn students into professional writers—we do not expect to turn students into full-fledged designers or fully formed orators when they are done with Revisions. We do want them to gain competence and confidence in each of the modes, separately and together, and we hope to help them fit into changing contexts of communication, productively and critically. As we said, it is a feature of our local situation that we could originally design a course that is not, even primarily, a writing course, and we did what we did for the reasons outlined. We also can report that this year a different colleague—one not involved in the original design—took over responsibility for the course and training graduate students to teach it, and in the process we noticed that a more “traditional” notion of composition moved more to center, with instructors being asked to give more sustained attention to writing than our design called for. And we suspect that over time other changes will be made or evolve, as the course is overseen by others and as instructors negotiate what instruction in multimodal communication is or should be.

#### **THE COURSE: HOW WE SUPPORT IT, HOW WE ASSESS IT, SOME LEARNING . . .**

In keeping with the need for coherence and in order to facilitate the development of useful support materials (class exercises, ways of using the readings, grading rubrics, etc.), all Revisions instructors participate in a week-and-a-half long orientation before classes start; they also get together in workshops two to three times a semester. New instructors have several more days of orientation and take a year-long pedagogy seminar that meets once a week, in addition to participating in the semester’s workshops; new graduate student instructors visit each other’s classes and the classes of more experienced teachers. During the orientation, semester workshops, and pedagogy seminar we listen to presentations by faculty and graduate students whose areas of expertise are rhetoric and composition, speech communication, visual studies, or some combination; we also have people from the community or campus speak about local possibilities for civic action. In addition to the director of graduate teaching assistant instruction, two advanced graduate students—experienced in teaching Revisions—support teachers of Revisions: the director and assistants are available for discussion about classes, to help with the planning of syllabi, and to visit classes for feedback. We share ideas for class exercises, ways of keeping assignments productively sequenced, and ways of coping with the stress involved in trying to do so much in so little time.

This kind of support for teachers began when the class we were teaching was a more conventional composition class, and, by holding to this support (and increasing the length of orientation), we were able to help teachers make what had to be a quick transition from teaching written communication to teaching written, visual, and oral communication. Nonetheless, the transition had its rocky moments: many of the graduate students had considerable experience setting up and running composition classes and so were resentful of having a course designed for them, even though they had had input during the initial design phases (but, unfortunately, little input during the design of many of the course particulars, which necessarily had to take place over a summer) and even though few of them had much experience teaching across the modes of communication. Understandably, also, many teachers were nervous about—and hence somewhat upset about—having to teach a class that promised such a complex interweaving of the three distinct modes of communication.

As the course has progressed, however, and as we all have become more comfortable and flexible with the day to day realities of making concrete what we shaped, teachers and the core group of course designers have started to relax into believing that the course is working. Informally, we hear from other teachers across campus that students think *Revisions* is giving them real tools, abilities, and habits of analysis they can apply in their varied school and work communication practices; while some students are cranky about the civic advocacy aspect of the course, many others have welcomed that they are taken seriously as agents in shaping the communities in which they move. Most students also report enjoying being able to make objects—brochures, logos, video public service announcements—that allow them more creativity and exploration than is usual in what they call “English class;” the concreteness of this making and the sense that they see themselves in what they make have often given students, we have noticed, more motivation in thinking about the real rhetorical functioning of these objects in the world. More formally, as a result of pre- and post-tests that we are using for assessment, we are seeing that over the fifteen weeks of the course students are gaining in sensitivity to the audiences with whom they communicate: because they are asked to make different kinds of communication—paper brochures as well as Web pages, for example, or oral presentations as well as writing—and because we have worked to emphasize the different vocabularies and concepts of the disciplinary modes at the same time we work to integrate the modes rhetorically, we are seeing that students come to understand audiences from different angles, in different contexts, and in finer and more complex detail than when audience is approached through a single mode. It is important to emphasize here this matter of vocabularies and concepts: now that we are past the initial design



stages and have taught and seen the course taught over six semesters, we have learned from classroom experience—from watching students learn and from their changing responses to the formal assessment materials—that we not only needed a coherent, theoretically robust language for designing this course in multimodal instruction, but we also needed to make that language a part of the content of the course. We need to make the concepts on which we based the course available to the students by weaving them into daily classroom practice—hence the course’s mix of situated practice with overt instruction (to use the New London Groups’ terminology).

The course also appears to be working, generally, for the graduate student teachers. The RTC graduate program has always been interdisciplinary and had a strong focus on communication technologies; it has therefore always attracted students interested in broader notions of composition than the traditional. Many of the graduate students are enjoying being able to apply and think through in their teaching theories about multiliteracies and new media that inform so much of what they read.

There are also, of course, aspects of Revisions that are problematic. Because of differences in the disciplines attached to visual and oral communication, it is sometimes hard to move students—and teachers—to attend to the broader contexts of these modes of communication. Visual studies, for example, has an immense gap between texts that offer practical, often step-by-step approaches to visual composition and the rich and thick theoretical work now being done in visual culture and histories of the development of ways of seeing; because of this gap between theory and practice, there is little already written that helps students see how the practical advice that encourages them to lay out coherent pages of crisp visual hierarchies ties them into (for example) cultural practices of industrialization and standardization. There is little already written, in other words, to help students move from their immediate needs of making a page that fits a context to thinking about how they can work with and against visual conventions in making visual compositions that might question how the visual aspects of texts have been shaped and shape us. Similarly, speech texts for undergraduates offer practical, directive, hands-on approaches on how to give a short oral presentation but there are few writings that help students make the bridge between such focused development and how the genre of oral presentation supports certain kinds of perhaps problematic relations between speaker and audience. But these gaps are also opportunities: some teachers of Revisions are making issues like these the subjects of dissertations, and are motivating us to develop more of our own materials. These gaps also cause us to think more about what we are already trying to achieve in the course, and about how our largest concern is that of time: our goals ask us to reach for a lot, and—as we did when we taught more traditional

composition classes—we wish this course could be extended across several semesters, for our own learning about multimodal discourse as well as for student learning.

In short, we see the kinds of teacher-researchers emerging from our graduate program as changing in ways that reflect changes in the field and in the worlds we share with our students. Since the advent of computers and writing, composition teachers have been being challenged to develop their pedagogical repertoires, and the shift to multimodality we have described merely continues that trend in a new direction. The twist we believe we have added is that graduate students in our program will be more conversant with the histories and struggles making up the areas of rhetoric and composition, communication studies, and visual design, and as a result they will be in a better position to negotiate the demands made of them in the programs they move on to and the institutional politics surrounding those demands.

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this paper, we described how Heyda, George and Trimbur, and Mailloux attribute the failure of the communication class in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s to a lack of organizational support at the national level, to teachers' inability to develop strong and complex theory and pedagogy for classes that mixed oral and written modes, and to institutional resistance. We know we cannot control how the particular course we have developed, *Revisions*, will fare in the future, but in the design of the course, we tried to be alert to the matters raised by Heyda, George and Trimbur, and Mailloux.

The longevity and effectiveness of *Revisions* will certainly be enhanced as faculty across campus, those who teach the course, administrators, and students not only see the course tied to such larger efforts to rethink how students learn to communicate but also see the course receiving national organizational consideration and support. In support, we can point to—and take encouragement and ideas from—similar efforts emerging on campuses across the nation (North Carolina State University, Boston University, University of Missouri-Columbia, Iowa State University, and Stanford, to name a few); some simply “add” speech to existing composition courses, some merge WAC with CAC Programs, and some only seek to strengthen the visual dimensions of writing through technology, but taken together the trend toward a broader definition of composition seems clear. In support of our work we can also point, thankfully, to recent efforts by the Rhetoric Society of America and the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies to bridge organizations concerned with rhetorical studies. And although there are not widespread national or international organizations for studying

multimodal pedagogy and curricula, the CCCC, the RSA and the NCA have been open to—and sometimes actively sought—conference presentations on communication modalities other than the written, and books and journal articles on these modalities have been increasing yearly as interest—and the recognition of need for such teaching—grows. Because of such publishing, we can also in our discussions with students, teachers, and administrators refer to the varying ways in which well-regarded theorists (many of whom we have already mentioned in this paper) are arguing for—if not exactly a course like the one that we have designed—courses that broaden our notions of composition, given present cultural conditions. Trimbur and George, for example, point to the emergence of cultural studies and the fading of notions of “high culture” and the sensibilities toward mass culture that went along with them, but they, like the New London Group, are especially attentive to the changing dynamics of communication. Referring positively to the CCCC reluctance to abandon the “4th C,” George and Trimbur argue, in words that suggest a large part of what happens in *Revisions*, that

“Communication” exerts a useful pressure to acknowledge that writing cannot be reduced to the mental activity of composing [. . .] “Communication” pulls us toward the actual, the material. It makes writing, like other types of communication (musical, graphic, handicraft, engineering, design), into an act of labor that quite literally fashions the world. (697)

The New London Group, perhaps more than George and Trimbur, also stress how their semiotic theory, based on the language of design (“Available Designs,” “Designing,” and “The Redesigned”) “fits in well with our view of social life and social subjects in fast-changing and culturally diverse societies” (20). What this changing scene calls for, of course, are new pedagogies, which, again, the New London Group has begun to generate, and which we have tried to build upon, extend, and adjust to our local circumstances, our history, and our experiences with teaching multimodal communication.

The second stumbling block to the communication class of the 1940s and 1950s—the inability of teachers to develop growing and complex theoretical underpinnings to the work of integrating the written and the oral—is also addressed, in part, by the work of the theorists we have cited in this paper. Their work supports what we do in our course at the same time it supports the developing practices and theories of the graduate students and faculty who teach the course. It is clear that complex theories exist to get a class such as ours off the ground, and the climate of thought and focus

present in the existing theory, together with the pleasurable challenges of teaching this class, suggest that theories and approaches will continue to develop and provide more support.

There is one issue, finally, that Heyda, George and Trimbur, and Mailoux raise that we, happily, do not have to face too much. Because all who helped design Revisions are housed in a humanities department, we do not have the problems of dealing with turf and resources that can come when working across departments. We have had disciplinary differences, of course, but because we were already used to working (and sometimes being edgy) together doing curriculum building before we had to design Revisions, we had already—to the extent necessary—learned the importance of finding strategies for accommodating and respecting what each other brings to the table. The general education situation on our campus required us to sit down together and kept us at the task of designing this course, but we are aware that we can only continue if we acknowledge and honor the different vocabularies, histories, and disciplines we have each learned. There is no point in designing the kind of course we have if we do not, individually and pedagogically, believe that each of the modalities and its attached disciplines offers as rich and complex possibilities for thought, communication, and expression as the others.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> What should we call our programs as our notions of composition broaden?

<sup>2</sup> It is very hard here (and in the descriptions to follow on committee negotiations) not to think about—and to second, strenuously—the varying levels of advice about stretching WPA work outside of one’s department and learning about national organizations that Hesse gives in his article “Understanding Larger Discourses in Higher Education: Practical Advice for WPAs.”

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning here that part of what helped us get as far as we have with Revisions has been the addition of the visual to the course. Speech and composition bring with them a complicated history, interwoven and conflicted on several levels (institutional, theoretical, and pedagogical). By bringing the language of primarily visual design into the mix, one would think the process of integration would get exponentially more complicated, but in our experience, the presence of the visual, the fresh language it brings to the scene of instruction, the slightly different ways it addresses audiences (through notions of “participatory design,” for example, and through its emphasis on the bodily aspects of communication), and its focus on production, have interrupted the historical standoff between speech and writing and allowed us to think of them in new terms, on fresh ground.

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