

Justin Lewis
Teaching Philosophy
September 2015

Over the last eight years as a college writing instructor, I've come to approach teaching as an act of collaborative inquiry, a pedagogical movement wherein I work with students to compose critical-analytical texts. Classical rhetorical principles have long guided my pedagogy; however, as my research and teaching foci have shifted toward technical writing and professional communication, I've integrated a variety of approaches that emphasize rhetorical situation, design, *ethos* and relationality, inviting students to create texts and textual objects that are user-oriented. Whether teaching an introductory core writing course or an advanced course on documentation, my pedagogical practice reliably offers students opportunities to mature as thinkers, writers workers and citizens.

Rhetorical Perspective

Teaching rhetorical perspective means cultivating student ability to historicize a rhetorical moment, accounting for strategies and tactics of resistance by paying special attention to the cultural-historical traces embedded in texts, tools, technologies and communities. Using a Rhetorical Genre Studies orientation, my pedagogy emphasizes how technical and professional documents are instrumental in understanding institutional culture and broader systems of technoscientific activity. In so doing, my pedagogy invites students to move beyond fixed, often artificial, writing situations, extending research into the ways that rhetoric moves from site to site, rhetor to rhetor and network to network.

As an example of how my pedagogy encourages expansive notions of rhetorical perspective, I recently asked students in a Professional Writing course to trace the proliferation of Writing Studies policy documents on the web. Using a couple of targeted search tools, students created maps that highlighted the numerous constituencies invested in the CCCC's statement on Intellectual Property, the Portland Resolution, and the WPA statement on plagiarism and academic dishonesty. After detailing how these documents circulate across the web, students worked backward, identifying the discourse communities (and their attendant values, norms and purposes) shared across a variety of contexts. Tracing textual circulation in this activity helped students develop more robust interpretations of textual activity, allowing them to more plainly see how texts function as mediators, or boundary objects, among multiple overlapping rhetorical situations and discourse communities.

Design

Reworking the rhetorical situation to accommodate the networked effects of rhetorical perspective leads to another core approach of my teaching philosophy: design. Integrating design-based approaches into classroom activities results from an acute awareness of the multiple rhetorical situations, discourse communities and motives that exert pressure and influence on the communication process. Often, the technical writing is portrayed as *description*; in other words, the job of the technical communicator is to transparently re-present realities of the workplace. Of course, creating technical writing is itself an intensely rhetorical process involving numerous textual and visual *design* choices. Following [Lawson's Properties of Design](#), my pedagogy emphasizes problems, solutions and processes when creating technical communications, inviting students to develop a variety technical and professional writing solutions to institutional and organizational problems. As I emphasize in my courses, problems are negotiable and solutions are myriad . . . how we bring both problems and solutions together are through processes, or creative acts of intentional design.

To evaluate the efficacy of their technical and professional writing, students in my courses are required to test their designs for usability and accessibility. In terms of usability, after designing first drafts of technical documents such as instruction sets or white papers, students use multiple performance-based tests (Likert scales, think-aloud real-time testing, timed-tests) and reflective

sessions (interviews, postscript talk-aloud screencasts) to evaluate the usability of their creations. Based on these sessions, students return to their designs, revising to incorporate feedback gathered throughout the testing process. Once students have iteratively revised their designs based on usability testing results, we also check for accessibility. If considering web-based documents, students use the [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) as a guide to test creations using a variety of tools (WAVE, AChecker, MAUVE, etc.). If considering other digital documents, students evaluate accessibility by ensuring that the format of their documentation is machine-readable and in compliance with the best practices of the [Accessible Digital Office Document \(ADOD\) Project](#).

In addition to designing individual documents for usability and accessibility, I also encourage systems-thinking in relation to design in my courses. Because of recent shifts in technical communication praxis, I emphasize single-source composition in addition to complete document design. When shifting to topical text design, I place greater emphasis on standardization, data definition and reusability because these are the constraints that characterize much contemporary technical communication. As a contrast to single-source composition, I also teach (with varying degrees of success) the systemic interdependency of single-sourced content, emphasizing the intentional design of structuring frameworks such as knowledgebases, wikis and folksonomic curations. As symbolic-analytic work that elicits abstraction, experimentation, collaboration and systems-thinking, designing content management solutions provides an exciting counterpoint to the topically-based single-source writing that increasingly dominates technical communication practice.

Ethos

While design oriented writing encourages experimentation and discovery, I also integrate tasks that promote *ethos*-making into my teaching practice. Concentrating on self-representation in digital environments, many of the tasks I use in my professional writing pedagogy serve a dual purpose: to create effective multimodal writing while also producing credibility and legitimacy through *ethos* building. Because of the networked nature of contemporary writing, writerly *ethos* takes on new responsibilities when rhetorical productions move through fluid networks of textual exchange; as such, accurate self-representation is perhaps the most important aspect of my pedagogy.

In multiple courses offered to both face-to-face and online student communities, I've asked students to develop their digital *ethos* by securing, creating, and owning their professional digital identity. The class activity of developing one's own web space requires a clear definition of rhetorical purpose and exigency, inviting students to explicitly consider what sort of digital self is appropriate to craft for potential digital audiences. This self is created through association-building with other online resources as well as effective website functionality, usability, and design. The end result of this *ethos*-making assignment is the design, construction and implementation of the student's own professional representation in a digital space. Often students continue to curate this professional digital identity after my course, using it as a starting point for crafting their post-college professional persona.

Relationality

A relational pedagogy brings rhetorical perspective, design and *ethos*-making together, conceiving of professional and technical writing as an activity of civic and ethical responsibility to others. Ultimately, rhetorical production is about relationality, or the complex and often contradictory ways that writings relate to the discursive and material worlds that exist both “in here” and “out there.” Practicing a pedagogy of relationality means utilizing design to assist students in creating technical and professional communications that are aware of their cultural-historical location, radically user-centered and *usable*. As reflective objects, these writings also work toward *ethos*-building ends. Recognizing the ecological nature of rhetorical production in the networked scene of contemporary communication, the relational pedagogy I attempt – with varying degrees of success – locates technical writing as a complex and multifaceted act whose systemic effects have important repercussions for civic and individual life.

Conclusion

Weaving together rhetorical perspective, design, *ethos*-making and relationality, my pedagogy attempts to bring together rhetoric and writing to help students create effective, efficient and user-centered communication artifacts. Whether faced with the need to develop creative solutions to workplace problems, to compose documents that mobilize or instruct digital audiences, or to design digital spaces to fulfill professional or personal goals, my pedagogy emphasizes the role of rhetoric and writing in productive action. While approaches that emphasize design, self-representation and relationality are certainly not the only methods of fostering strong writing and communication habits, they are particularly well-suited to prepare students to engage and compose critical-ethical writings for contemporary life.