Teaching Multimodal Ethnography with “New” Media Technologies for WMSCI 2010

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ABSTRACT

In “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures,” the New London Group established a four-step platform to transform students’ approaches to learning and literacy. The authors of this paper build upon that vision, combining it with those of Richardson, Reed, Borsheim, Jenkins, and others who insist that novel approaches to pedagogy are needed to ground budding anthropologists in the emerging setting of digital scholarship and its visual, audible and interactive settings. Initiated in 2008, the College of Charleston’s “Center for Expressive Culture” has engendered new approaches to teaching and learning that address critical media literacies for students of the social sciences and humanities. New and readily available technologies enable the documentation of cultural objects for a fresh generation of ethnographers; they also enhance the collection, organization and visualization of data. In this paper, we discuss the experience of creating multiliterate students from a number of disciplines; we consider the expansion of field sites to virtual communities and explore the lessons learned after three semesters of a course aimed at teaching expressive cultural research methods to undergraduates. Best practices are examined in light of obstacles like the time-consuming nature of ethnographic research and multimedia production, the importance of teaching both theory and practice in depth, and the need to address ancillary but important issues like ethics and social responsibility. The paper explains how, within the changing landscapes of social media, intellectual property, and information literacy, students learned to operationalize ideological theories in praxis; in the process, they confronted language and its relationship to culture and society even as they tackled the fundamentals of producing ethnographies and documentaries in the emergent world of new media technology.

Keywords: digital ethnography, digital humanities, multimodality, media literacy, research methods, semiotics, social webs, visual culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The design of an interdisciplinary course in visual research methods presents many challenges en route to new opportunities. According to Richardson, post-education students will be required to flourish in networked personal learning spaces; therefore, they need to be taught a specific set of skills [15, p. 130]. Richardson elaborates with four (4) main points: First, because anyone can publish content to the Web, students must be taught to be active consumers of information rather than passive acceptors of it. Second, teachers must not only teach, but also model the ways in which ideas and products can be published online. Third, students should be taught to work in collaborative environments and to employ a number of communication skills and processes. Finally, students should be taught the skills necessary to collect, store, and retrieve relevant information. Richardson suggests that, as teachers increasingly use wikis and weblogs, students will be better prepared for the real world [15, p. 130]. Moreover, the more exposure a student’s work has, the more he or she will be equipped to understand that the individual voice matters [15, p. 133]. The use of multimedia technologies also enables educators to become more comfortable and confident with “new” (i.e., “Web 2.0”) applications [15, p. 90]. As they learn the challenges and benefits of incorporating technology into their everyday lives, students are said to benefit greatly from improving their multimedia literacies. A case in point, and in corroboration with Richardson’s insights, is educator Dawn Reed’s observation that students in her classroom, in recognition of the wider audience of the Internet, wished to have their speech “perfect.” [3, p. 89]. Thus we see how Internet behaviors can build good foundations for students’ futures [3, p. 90].

From all of the above it is clear that, in our increasingly multimodal and interdisciplinary world, students are in need of the new literacy skills training for which Richardson is calling. The Association of College Research Libraries notes the importance of teaching today’s students the skills necessary to process a large amount of information and transform it into
personal knowledge. This constructivist approach to engendering life-long learners includes insuring that, initially, students possess the ability to recognize the importance of accessing appropriate sources. Having achieved that prowess, scaffolding ensues; they learn how to evaluate sources, use information gained for specific purposes, and develop an understanding of the greater contexts in which information exists [1]. In tandem, the constructivist platform asks students to consider how accessed knowledge functions within social, legal, cultural, and economic domains. When one grasps the fact that understanding the full breadth of information is critical to the humanist endeavor, the salience of the acquisition of this latter skill—the recognition of the contextual features of knowledge—becomes clear.

Since 2005, we have been involved in the shaping of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology's new research direction. The trajectory, collaborative since its inception, began with the establishment of a small but state-of-the-art video archive built as a result of grant writing and fund raising. Subsequently, a laboratory, within which our cooperative endeavor could be actualized, became available. In 2008 the facility became fully equipped and functional, and in the fall semester of that year students were able to experience for the first time a team-taught course entitled “ANTH 319: Research Methods in Expressive Culture.”

2. MULTILITERACIES

In order to frame the aforementioned, it is worth acknowledging that a sea of change having to do with the understanding of literacy has occurred. For more than a century the term has been defined as the mere ability to read and write. Indubitably, these skills are still necessary components of the definition. Recently, however, their narrowness has been deemed insufficient to a full-blown meaning of the term. Indeed, due to the explosion of information and technology, the very definition of what it means to be literate is undergoing revision [15, p. 130]. Educators au courant with the literature are trained on what is now perceived as a paradigm shift. From an understanding of “literacy” in the singular has emerged the new plural word “multiliteracies,” a term coined by the New London Group and based on the assumption that technology impacts the nature of texts and the ways people use and interact with them [17]. A multiliterate person is:

flexible and strategic and can understand and use literacy and literate practices with a range of texts and technologies in socially responsible ways in a socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse world. [S/he is able] to fully participate in life as an active and informed citizen [3, p. 87].

Multiliteracies have been touted for additional reasons: they are recognized as essential for those emerging from the enclaves of higher education to enter the competitive world of work. Of equal or greater interest is the claim that societal immersion in technology causes neurological effects that produce cognitive functions that differ from those of previous generations [3, p. 7]. Some go so far as to argue that students with these mental operations may become unable to cope effectively with traditional, linear learning patterns that emphasize the verbal and the sequential.

Not the least is the importance that multiliteracies bring to bear on one’s pedagogical success. Anthropologist Michael Wesch, who has embraced the new teaching modalities with alacrity, goes a step further by acknowledging not only the challenges that teaching innovative modes of multiliteracy poses in this era, but the concomitant demand to reconsider the cultural world as we know it. He posits: “We’ll need to rethink a few things . . . copyright, authorship, identity, ethics, aesthetics, rhetoric, governance, privacy, commerce, love, family, ourselves” [18].

Returning to the discussion of the teaching of Anthropology and ethnographic field methods, we stress that, even as we turn to the visual, visceral and nonlinear, many tried and true approaches to social science scholarship endure. Dhiraj Murthy emphasizes this point by stressing that “Ethnography is about telling social stories,” and that it is crucial to remember that, as ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. On the other hand, Murthy fully admits that, although the stories have remained vivid, with the plethora of new technologies, “the ways that they [the stories] are told have changed” [9, p. 838].

These are the kinds of beliefs and perspectives that motivated our decision to offer Anth 319, “Research Methods in Expressive Culture.” Our background included training in anthropology, library and information science, visual art and visual culture, and language and cultural studies. We were influenced by ideas promulgated by filmmaker George Lucas in an interview with Elizabeth Daley, dean of the University of Southern California’s School of Cinema and Television. The famous filmmaker seized the opportunity to expound upon the new kind of knowledge that will be necessary in the 21st century. In order to avoid media illiteracy, Lucas argued, students might be expected to know the techniques of major filmmakers. He elaborated, stating that, even as they pursue learning about novels, essays, and other textual forms in classrooms today, tomorrow’s students will be required to grasp the grammatical components of cinema:

I began to realize that the potential for multimedia to enhance the learning process was just astronomical. . . . I’m a big proponent of a new kind of grammar that goes beyond words. To tell a story now means grasping a new kind of language, which includes understanding how graphics, color, lines, music and words combine to convey meaning [5, p. 20].

As instructors, we perceived the need to equip students, eager to be effective ethnographers and prepared social science graduates in the world at large, with the skills to communicate in “new” languages that demand increasingly varied media literacies. We understood that the modalities that students need for proficiency to express their ideas and fully communicate with others in the twenty-first century include, not only the language of Hemmingway and Hitchcock, as Lucas noted, but that of social media applications like Facebook and YouTube. These, along with Twitter, MySpace, and a host of other online communities, became some of our instructional sites, serving to prime students for the subcultures that they studied in the course and that many inhabited virtually.
Following Jenkins, we also understood that, for students to navigate the new media on the Web, we as teachers had to rethink our own understandings of literacy. As we created a participatory culture within learning environments, we engaged eleven (11) core competencies thought to facilitate the engagement of students within the multiliteracies paradigm: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multi-tasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking and negotiation [8, p. 56]. Each of these, to varying degrees, we incorporated into our pedagogical strategies. Our course objectives succinctly established the process of ethnographic fieldwork and the necessity of using a variety of tools familiar to and readily understood by multiliterate ethnographers. We stressed that such tools would enable students at every step of the learning process; they would guide data collection and contribute to students’ insights and interpretations of what they had gathered. From the outset, students were instructed that strong visual and multimedia components would be essential aspects of their training; they learned, too, that the techniques they were to learn would enhance their ability to communicate their research results.

3. NATURALIZING TECHNOLOGIES

Walter Ong posits that the question of a technology’s ultimate benefit to humans is best gauged by the degree to which it is interiorized: “Technologies are artificial, but... artificiality is natural to human beings.” Ong goes on to say that “technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it” [2, p. 5]. Adding to the concept of interiorization, Howard Rheingold suggests that the question of whether new media, particularly social media, are useful “depends on who knows how to use these media for the purposes of being a more informed individual” [14]. The insights of Ong and Rheingold might be applied to the use of technology in anthropological and social scientific research. We might safely assert that technology, properly interiorized by skilled and informed fieldworkers, enhances rather than degrades the ethnographic experience and its concomitant presentation efforts. Moreover, the notion of “interiorizing” technology is interesting on another level: implicitly, it posits the existence of its opposite, “exteriority.” From this we extrapolate that those who have not internalized certain technologies, and those for whom technologies remain exterior, are less comfortable “in their bones” with the use of them. Bourdieu defined the concept of “habitus” as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions” [4, p. 5]. To further Bourdieu’s definition, we interpret his meaning to be an inclination, a leaning towards, a “correct feeling.” This extension is à propos here, because the interiorization of technology means that a proclivity towards the use of it has been developed in the individual to such an extent that, for her or him, technology has becomes naturalized.1

Due to the fact that a main goal of Anth 319, “Research Methods in Expressive Culture,” was to give our students real experience in conducting innovative qualitative field research that could be applied to many disciplines—communications, health sciences, information science, cultural studies, business and marketing, as well as anthropology—we attempted to naturalize technology for those engaged in the research process. Additional instructional goals, abetting the textbooks we had chosen, were aimed at showcasing new systems, putting research sites and data collection in context with real-time searching capacities that the World Wide Web makes available, and providing supplemental resources beyond e-mail, BBS, chat clients, MUDs, and web pages. Students were encouraged to incorporate—and in essence, begin to interiorize the process of employing—tools that they found meaningful, and to make them a part of their personal researcher’s toolkit.

Although our students and others like them have been called “digital natives” and the “Net Generation,” deftness with certain aspects of technology has been limited; it can safely be said that the depth and breadth of new media literacy has failed to reach them [11] [16]. True to form, those who arrived at the Center for Expressive Culture laboratory had interiorized technologies like E-mailing, text-messaging, “Google” searching and Facebook social-networking. In addition, collectively, they knew some of the more popular lexical products of these media, such as “BRB” (Be Right Back) and “LOL” (Laugh out Loud), as well as standard western emoticons such as those that represent happiness, sadness, wonder, and surprise. Overall, however, our students seemed to lack awareness of the greater social context important to the Humanities and to the discipline of Anthropology. They also lacked critical skills of organization and evaluation that would enable the creation of a research project undertaken to fulfill a specific purpose.

From the outset, with an eye toward the culmination of the course, students were presented with and exposed to classroom technologies (i.e., state-of-the art laptop computers, visual and audio projection systems, etc.). Enrollees learned how to use a variety of hardware and software materials, including audio and video recording devices and editing and transcription software programs. They were introduced to how personal digital devices like iPhones and other mobile devices could be utilized for data collection, and they became familiar with methods of locating, learning and accessing easily obtainable software programs like GIMP for image editing and Transcription and Transcriber for converting interview data. It was heartening for us to expose students to the fact that much of the software which could be deployed to collect, organize and analyze fieldwork data was freely available via open source licenses. Likewise, we demonstrated visualization options like Wordle, Many Eyes (a project to encourage sharing and conversation around visualizations) [12], and Real Estate Roller Coaster (a visualization of housing prices made with the video game Roller Coaster Tycoon) [13]. We exposed students to various options available for presenting data online. These included Flickr (a photography-sharing repository) and Voicethread (a multimedia site that facilitates group conversations around images, documents, and videos).

The ephemerality of data preserved in these environments was discussed; other cautions having to do with the use of these systems included the need for organized digital collection skills and basic technology ones. We also stressed the importance of sustained participation over the course of a research project.

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1 The full definition, albeit lengthy, is worth acknowledging here, for it informs much of our intent in this course Habitus is, in Bourdieu’s words, “the system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to obtain them” For more on the naturalization process, see Richard Parmentier, Signs in Society Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, Chapter 8.
The use of social media sites was encouraged for a number of purposes; applications included the creation of surveys via the use of Google Docs and Survey Monkey and the collecting, managing and citing of research sources via the use of Zotero reference management software. We taught students how to organize web research with social bookmarking sites like Delicious and Diigo and how to record and conduct virtual interviews via Skype and Call Recorder. As our charges took virtual field trips and undertook collaborative work in virtual spaces, they learned how to collect data using chat logs, Twitter hashtags, Facebook groups, and virtual environments like SecondLife. They were faced with, and asked to discuss in groups, the advantages, disadvantages, ethical concerns and appropriateness of each system in relation to their own research, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of fieldwork findings. Perhaps not surprisingly, many, unaware that chat messages, tweets, and Facebook wall posts shared with friends could be collected and archived, were uncomfortable with these realizations; they queried as to whether such behaviors could be conducted without permission or knowledge. Most were unfamiliar with the need to read social sites’ privacy policies and terms of use. Additionally, many students were ignorant of the existence of SecondLife and/or had never entered the virtual world. To expose students to social interaction in this realm, one of our hands-on classroom activities was to play a virtual world character, teleporting her to new locations so that she could interface with other players. Contrary to some of our expectations, students nearly unanimously regarded SecondLife as an environment “for old people” and were somewhat wary of interacting in that domain.

In order to help students learn how to plan and prepare for fieldwork and use equipment properly, we taught them how to perform equipment checks, ask for the signing of consent statements, and engage in a hands-on approach to the acquisition of new skills. In one exercise, after a discussion of “best practices,” students were put into groups and released into the local urban area to complete an hour-long “Locate Intertextuality” assignment. Armed with consent forms and various types of audio-visual equipment, they were enjoined to perform a number of tasks, from seeking permissions to filming and/or photographing and interviewing informants. They were expected to return with findings and results, both of which would be discussed in the remainder of the class. Fellow students were expected to provide advice and offer comments.

Intentionally, and unknown to students, we “booby trapped” some of the equipment beforehand; that is to say, we left it devoid of batteries, tapes, memory cards and the like. Invariably, those who planned properly by checking equipment, etc., were able to showcase their successful work and to explain their examples subsequently to their peers. In contrast, those who failed to perform the necessary equipment checks were required to share the frustrating experience of returning from “the field” sans content. Others unsuccessful in securing consent forms were in the unfortunate position of divulging “lost opportunity” encounters and the realization of the fact that these, too, comprise the fieldwork endeavor. Ultimately, this exercise instilled in students the importance of proper planning to offset the disastrous consequences of fieldwork failure.

The course consisted of semester-long activities aimed at specialized research and information-skills training. All students were exposed to additional resources and information that they had not previously experienced or had the opportunity to study previously, like fieldwork design and Institutional Review Board (IRB) certification ethics. Assignments were used to help students define and refine their research topics, introduce them to background sources, expose them to discipline-specific terminology, methods and contexts, and help them to identify key concepts, social theories, and subcultures. Collecting data on topics of their choice, students were given practical exercises in interviewing, field note taking, and data coding and analysis.

Each of these activities was undertaken in order to prepare students for “real life” (“RL”) issues likely to be confronted in the various aforesaid disciplines. The course culminated in an academic paper and a conference-style delivery of students’ fieldwork findings; exposed to the techniques of delivering material in an understandable progression, students presented their findings to professors and peers, demonstrated their prowess in the utilization of visual forms of communication, and showcased their creative and artistic exploration of issues of anthropological concern.

In the course of the semester, students were grouped into teams by interest and given specific readings, viewings, and related resources. As part of the exercise, they were taught how to work collaboratively, either in person or in virtual space, through the use of Google Docs. At least once during the semester, each team member became group leader and presenter of group findings. In order to address particular comments of fellow students and to account for participation in the group, each student was assigned a code by color, a Google Docs feature that worked particularly well for all concerned. Instructors posted comments and questions each week, and subsequently monitored students’ participation and progress.

We found this latter method to have numerous advantages. Students learned to relate to those with whom they had had little former interaction, and being part of a team encouraged them to assume newly found responsibility. Those expected to present group findings were inclined to devote additional time to understanding materials and concepts. Often, the sharing of information provided new insights. Students were challenged to master the material in order to field questions and comments from peers and instructors during the reporting of the material for which they were responsible. Desire for greater comprehension encouraged discourse within—and later, in the sharing component, between—groups.

These are the methods we undertook to promote the naturalization of technology for our students. In order to expose students in Research Methods in Expressive Culture to the dynamic relationship between tools, programs, media hybridization, and culture, we shared a willingness to relinquish control at times in order to allow creativity to flourish. Often, this decision meant the toleration of intermittent chaos and messiness, the adaptation of lesson plans, and the search for new approaches to evaluate students’ performances as integral parts of the learning equation. In the classroom, committed to encouraging life-long learning and using a “guide-on-the-side” ideology (as opposed to a “sage on the stage” approach), we attempted to model the behaviors of co-learners and co-researchers, encouraging the sharing of information and resources with students and with one another. The same considerations that students were required to extend to their consultants were in turn applied to them; for instance, we sought their permission to use their products for our future endeavors.
4. STUDENT AND FACULTY OUTCOMES

Via situated learning, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice, the Center for Expressive Culture program, initiated in 2008, trained more than fifty (50) students at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. Students’ field research topics ranged from music (experimental music in Charleston and the comparative history of jazz in Charleston and New Orleans) to recording (the new field of Electronica); from local activism (organic farming, “Trash Auditing,” and “Peace Culture”) to art (the contemporary scene in Charleston); from gender studies (the study of local drag culture) to religion (Charleston’s Tibetan subculture); from dance (shag) to hospitality (theme tourism).

Over the course of the semester, students attempted to use a variety of tools, highlighted in detail above. More importantly they learned that the process of choosing and finding the proper techniques commences with an assessment of the needs of research and an awareness that the devices themselves will fluctuate constantly. As the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) points out:

Information literacy related to specific disciplines involves defining an information need in the context of the discipline, finding and evaluating the kinds of data, materials, and information required to research a subject in that field, and using and synthesizing the information to accomplish assigned and creative tasks, add to knowledge, and participate in the discourse of that discipline [1].

This is as true for applications, websites, and hardware as it is for more traditional resources like books and journal articles. It is worth emphasizing here that, following musician and visual artist David Byrne and others, we discouraged our charges from the use of PowerPoint in the delivery of their findings unless that method was deployed provocatively; in other words, unless students found a way to use it as a language to communicate a story [6].

Most satisfying was the fact that many students continued to research and present their findings even after the course concluded. For instance, four teams showcased their findings at a research and present their findings even after the course concluded. For instance, four teams showcased their findings at a research and

Another found the skills he learned useful for the future marketing of his family’s business. A third, who proceeded to the nursing profession, found that the course, in large part due to its large technology component, enabled her to place out of her graduate program’s research course.

Several language and area studies majors found their newly developed literacies useful for fieldwork abroad. An anthropology major, admitting that the course encouraged him to change his major, considered the College’s new field of study, “Computing and the Arts.” Many others contacted us with testimonials to the fact that the skill sets they acquired put them ahead of competitors in the employment market.

Overall, students revealed that such experiences added to their overall comfort levels, helped them to locate information they may not have found had they worked individually, and increased their confidence when the time came for them to present their fieldwork findings.

5. CONCLUSION

“Computing is not about computers any more. It is about living.” [10]. The ethnographer is no stranger to the complexity of exploring the practices and products of a culture, even in an environment of rapid change. As educators, we constantly struggle to remain relevant to a rapidly changing student body.

We believe the Internet today, particularly in the hyper-connected realms of social media, is ripe for a new wave of anthropologist, artist, and information professional. We work to help students become part of this new wave of scholarship, equipping them with tools from a long tradition of cultural analysis, and adding constantly to that set of tools.

Semester-long activities enabled us to build pedagogical theory and to demonstrate how techniques developed for one area of study could be modified and put to use in another. A new lexicon grounded in visual and material culture studies, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and other computer-mediated communications is now on students’ lips and at their fingertips, evidenced by their improved confidence, marketability, and desire to continue to conduct research beyond course requirements. Throughout the course, students were expected to demonstrate their ability to critically evaluate visual and written representations of fieldsites, informants, and the many additional cultural and lexical issues they had uncovered. Armed with a grounding in ethnographic fieldwork, data collection and analysis and the growing array of technological tools available to them, students developed a better understanding of the future of digital humanities. These skills have translated well into a variety of professions that require organization of information and effective communication.

On the other hand, although the benefits of our labors have been appreciable, difficulties remain. Funding is an enduring issue; much went into securing grants for space and equipment; the latter included the acquisition of computers and recording and storage devices. This overhead is not to be discounted, nor is the substantial input, time, and expertise from a number of faculty and staff both in and outside of the department. Moreover, building the Center for Expressive Culture and the course was labor intensive for core instructors and designers, despite the fact that two of us came to the task equipped with experience in
instructional technology and with proficiency in space design and management. Although there was considerable support from the chair of the Department and the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, minimal Instruction Technological undergirding came forth; neither did the latter’s personnel assist in the maintenance of the Center’s laboratory. These latter factors placed additional burdens on the pedagogical team.

When all is said and done, however, after having taught Anth 319: “Research Methods in Expressive Culture” for a year and a half, and after having exposed our students to the development of best practices related to issues of ethics, the shifting landscape of intellectual property, and the rising importance of cross-cultural approaches to information and visual literacies, we are even more confident of the need for the continuation of interdisciplinary instruction that increases students’ multiliteracy prowess and directly prepares them for their futures.

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