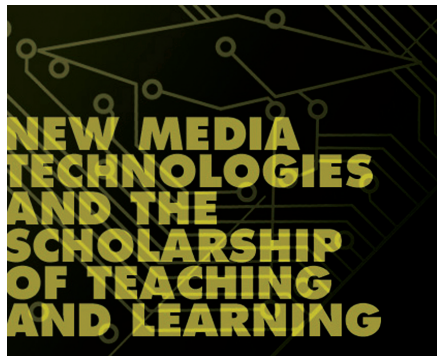




The Difference that Inquiry Makes:

A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning,
from the Visible Knowledge Project.

Edited By Randy Bass & Bret Eynon



"The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study of Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project," *edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon*

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From *The Difference that Inquiry Makes: A Collaborative Case Study on Technology and Learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project*¹, edited by Randy Bass and Bret Eynon

Introduction: Multimedia in the Classroom

Over a period of three years, I taught three courses that integrated multimedia with literature, film, history, and American studies. I did not want multimedia to simply be added on to my courses as some technological addition, like bringing a TV into a classroom. Rather, I wanted to conceptually integrate multimedia with course content. In order to do so, I built these courses around a simple question: how do we tell stories about America?

The assumption behind this question was that dominant culture's stories about the United States have been partial and limited in many ways. My courses examined the gaps in literary, filmic, and historical narratives about the United States, and also studied the attempts by authors from excluded populations to fill in these gaps, or to construct completely alternative narratives altogether. The students used multimedia to tell their own stories about America based on what they had seen and read. Multimedia enabled the students to be both critical and creative in discussing American stories, and in telling their own American stories.

What is multimedia? A medium is 1. a means of communication or expression, and 2. a condition or environment in which something may function or flourish. Therefore, multimedia in my definition is the use of multiple means of communication or expression that enables a more flexible and creative environment of learning and intellectual growth. Multimedia, in the way I am using it here in the context of teaching, is therefore primarily a pedagogical strategy for both teachers and students; it is secondarily a set of technological or creative tools—we can call them tactics in service of the strategy. What this definition emphasizes, then, is the need for teachers to define the strategic goals in their course for which multimedia is necessary, and then to

¹ About VKP: In all, more than seventy faculty from twenty-two institutions participated in the Visible Knowledge Project over five years. Participating campuses included five research universities (Vanderbilt University, the University of Alabama, Georgetown University, the University of Southern California, Washington State University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), four comprehensive public universities (Pennsylvania's Millersville University, California State University (CSU)--Monterey Bay, CSU Sacramento, Ohio's Youngstown State University, and participants from several four-year colleges in the City University of New York system, including City College, Lehman, and Baruch), and three community colleges (two from CUNY--Borough of Manhattan Community College and LaGuardia Community College, and California's Cerritos College). In addition to campus-based teams, a number of independent scholars participated from a half dozen other institutions, such as Arizona State and Lehigh University. The project began in June 2000 and concluded in October 2005. We engaged in several methods for online collaboration to supplement our annual institutes, including an adaptation of the digital poster-tool created by Knowledge Media Lab (Carnegie Foundation), asynchronous discussion, and web-conferencing. The VKP galleries and archives (<https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/vkp/>) provide a wealth of background information, including lists of participants, regular newsletters, and reports and essays by participants, as well as a number of related resources and meta-analyses.

define what tactics or tools must be used to achieve such goals. These tactics or tools may be computer-based programs that enable the manipulation of image, sound, and text; or they may be the more “traditional” forms of media like performances, installations, or the graphic arts.

Multimedia allowed the students and myself to address two critical limitations in American studies pedagogical and intellectual practice, phrased as questions:

- In many American studies courses, what we study are creative acts, whether those acts happen to be of a cultural type (literature, film, historical writing) or of a political type (political movements, labor organizing, domestic work). Why, then, do we require students to analyze these acts by writing papers that place distinct limits on creativity?
- A partial answer to the previous point is that we reproduce students in our own intellectual image; our scholarship serves as a model for theirs, and our discipline serves to also discipline them. What potential, then, does multimedia enable for revising academic disciplinary practice?

The overall implication of these two limits is that the form of our practice as teachers and scholars has a relationship to content. In general, the form of our scholarly practice—our writing—is utilitarian, serving a necessary function in the academic world. The form of our students’ writing serves a necessary function as well, namely, to provide us with a fairly rigid and therefore simple way of assessing their learning. The fact that their form mimics our own is not a coincidence. There is no reason, of course, for traditional academic writing—in the students’ case, the 5-7 page paper—to be the only form available for conducting academic inquiry or communicating results, except by dint of tradition.

Thus, one of the most important implications of using multimedia in the classroom is this: done properly, it allows students to be creative and to use multiple types of analysis and expression to do research and present results; this type of flexible learning accommodates students who think visually and audibly, who may not be interested in academics as a profession but who are excited by intellectual inquiry, and who are, ironically, independent thinkers who do not like the artificial constraints of academic disciplines. These types of students do not comprise the entire student population, but they are a significant number; multimedia is not a magic bullet or something suitable for everyone, but it is another tool for teaching and scholarship to address different needs.

For academics, the implication of my work with student multimedia composition is that this kind of composition that is not restricted to the typed page, and which can include audio, video, interactivity, hypertext, non-linear organization, and layering of information, may be very suitable for many kinds of academic research, especially but not limited to interdisciplinary work.

The Learning Curve: Lessons from Three Courses²

First Experiment: Technology and Pedagogy Compartmentalized

I approached the prospect of teaching my first multimedia course, Race, Gender and Nation in American Literature and Film, with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. My training was a

² Syllabi and assignments from the courses discussed here can be found in the VKP archives: https://digitalcommons.georgetown.edu/blogs/vkp/2009/02/17/nguyen_syllabi

two-week course in various kinds of multimedia technology, e.g., Adobe Premiere, Dreamweaver, Photoshop. After my training, I was still far from comfortable or competent in multimedia technology and had little idea how to integrate it conceptually into my course. This raised the difficult issue of how I could expect multimedia literacy from my students if I was not literate myself, an issue I was not able to resolve this first semester. I was, however, able to come up with my teaching question: how do we tell stories about America? During my first course, I compartmentalized pedagogy and technology. I taught the course content in my own class, and depended on my teaching assistants to teach technology and integrate it with course content in the lab sections. Besides showing some pictures, sound clips, and film clips in my own class, I did little to integrate multimedia with my teaching, mostly because I didn't have sufficient grasp of the technology.

As a result, the student multimedia projects spanned the spectrum. Some were basically illustrated papers. Multimedia had not substantively transformed the way the students thought or composed, although the project itself was intelligent and accomplished, if viewed as a term paper. Other projects took full advantage of multimedia potential; one student, for example, married her project's non-linear possibilities quite logically to the collected and fragmented memories that her family had of her grandmother. In this course, I also told the students that multimedia was not only computer-based; they could—and did—engage in performances and installation art, which we regrettably did not videotape.

An important aspect of the course was the heavy emphasis I laid upon argumentation, research, the archive, and the audience. What I feared in particular was that the multimedia projects would be all bells and whistles, with little substance. Therefore, I constantly reinforced with the students the idea that the basic principles of writing papers—presenting cogent arguments, backed up with substantive research, and framed in a logical structure—applied just as much to their multimedia projects, and would have an important influence on their grade. Furthermore, their projects would constitute a digital archive for the use of future generations of students. At the same time, even though they would be working in digital media, they could not rely solely on digital sources of information like the Internet, but they had to use library sources. Finally, these students, and possibly other people—friends, family members, other professors—would constitute the audience for the project, not just myself. This emphasis I laid upon argumentation, research, the archive, and the audience had the desired effect: the projects, even when they did not fully utilize multimedia potential, were very substantive in their research, and all demonstrated a consciousness of a wider audience than simply the professor, and the responsibility that entails toward the aesthetics of design.

With the question of audience, I wanted students to be invested in their projects; to borrow a phrase from real estate, I wanted them to show “pride of ownership.” Perhaps not surprisingly, I found myself invested in the multimedia projects to an enormous degree, much more so than in term papers.

Second Course: Highlighting Process and Modeling

I set about to teach this course (“Asian American Literature,” 16 students, 1 teaching assistant) quite differently than the previous one, although I kept the question “how do we tell stories about America?” as the core issue that brought together multimedia and the study, in this case, of Asian American literature and history. I was able to compose a serviceable Web site (no longer online) for the course, and I was determined to demonstrate to the students that I could also do some multimedia work. I was also determined that the multimedia training and the course content would be better integrated, and to this end, worked with my teaching assistant to design a course syllabus and a lab syllabus designed to gradually build student multimedia skills in conjunction with topics covered in class.

There were three major ways in which the course content and multimedia went hand-in-hand in this course. The first was the idea that multimedia skills could be developed like writing skills, i.e., through a process of gradual acquisition and revision. Thus, to prevent the students from feeling overwhelmed by their first multimedia projects, I assigned a midterm project where the students first wrote a 5-7 page paper, and then, after receiving my comments, translate that into a midterm project. The midterm project assignment as a whole, however, was an improvement upon the previous class, in terms of allowing the students to build basic multimedia skills gradually, and in relation to the analytical skills they learned in writing papers.

The second way in which the course content and multimedia went hand-in-hand in this course was that I modeled multimedia practice to the students. Late in the semester, the students read a book called *Dictee*, which incorporates prose, photographs, drawings, ideograms, pictures, cinematic still images, untranslated Korean and French, dense allusions to Greek mythology, Korean history and culture, cinematic history, and so on. It is a puzzling and demanding book that is multimedia in its form. As they began reading *Dictee*, but before I began lecturing on the book, I had them use this multimedia reading guide I composed for the book. Despite mistakes due to my own primitive multimedia skills, the student response was very positive. Informal polling and formal evaluations show that the students were reassured by the fact that the professor could do some of the things they were being trained to do, and that I understood what they were going through.

The third way in which the course content and multimedia went hand-in-hand in this course was that I designed my course syllabus to trace a movement from realism to postmodernism, which fit well with the technological training the students received, as they went from learning how to manipulate text and images, to practicing non-linear ways of organizing information and composing web pages. The nature of web design can be very postmodern, and, keeping in spirit with the idea of gradual skill acquisition, as the reading and topics became more demanding, so did the multimedia projects, culminating in the final team project. In the course, we went from reading realist novels like John Okada's *No No Boy* to postmodern books like *Dictee* (1982).

There were various other innovations I undertook in this course to enhance student learning and receptivity to multimedia. Storyboarding became very important, as we required students to think ahead and draw up visual plans about what their projects might look like. Students also pitched their projects to the entire class and received feedback. Project grading was partially based on peer evaluations, which occurred after students presented their projects to the entire class. These three techniques—storyboarding, pitching, and peer grading—built an atmosphere of mutual support and sharing.

After having done their final team multimedia projects, students were given the option of writing a final paper or composing a final individual multimedia project. Eleven of sixteen students took the multimedia option, which was encouraging, given their complaints about how much time was required. Clearly, they found something quite satisfying in multimedia composition. What was also very encouraging for me was that at least some students became better writers through multimedia the depth and sophistication of their thinking was enhanced through multimedia possibilities. One student had started the semester as a relatively mediocre writer, but by the end had blossomed, as is evident in the final project, which married the design aesthetics of socialist realism with a Marxist literary analysis. The converse, however, was also true; some students who were fine literary critics did not make the transition quite as ably into multimedia. What this experience shows is that multimedia has huge potential in enabling students who think visually and non-linearly to find avenues of critical expression, but is not suited for everyone.

Third Implementation: Integrative Approaches to Criticism and Creativity

Several important changes occurred for my third multimedia attempt, a course in Asian American literature. The Multimedia Literacy Project and I agreed that this third course would be an experiment with reduced resources, meaning that I would no longer have a dedicated teaching assistant, but that instead rotating assistants would teach particular multimedia skills. I would attend lab myself—something I had not done previously—to provide the continuity between the lab and the main course. Another important change was that I decided to introduce more multimedia content into my pedagogy; I had become more multimedia savvy.

Without a dedicated teaching assistant, I also undertook a revision of my syllabus, which shows my new understanding of how course content and multimedia skill training could be integrated very closely. For example, the first multimedia project, due in the fifth week, required students to construct a simple visual argument using only the juxtaposition of text, sound and image in order to discuss the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, depicted in John Okada's novel *No No Boy*, and contemporary discrimination, as we had discussed in light of the aftermath of September 11.

The details of this project assignment, and the details of my midterm project, final group project, and final individual project, show a reconceptualization of multimedia projects. Whereas in the previous two courses, there were few restrictions on the projects in the name of creative free license, I decided that a few ground rules would be beneficial to give this creativity some minimal shape and demands. I also paid greater emphasis to drafting and outlining in this course, and revising. With revising, I decided that I was more interested in using a grade as a carrot than as a stick, because what I wanted more than anything else was well-accomplished work. Therefore, I gave every student the opportunity to revise his or her midterm and final projects after the initial grade, with everyone having the chance of receiving an A.

In this class, I drew considerably on previous student multimedia projects, sometimes to teach, and sometimes to model. As a modeling tool, the projects served as the students' first object of peer evaluation; they went over the project in great detail, evaluating its successes and limitations, using the same criteria that would be used to evaluate their own projects. This concept of modeling proved useful in general throughout the class. As I sat in on the lab sections, I learned the same skills the students did, and I created the same projects the students did. Simply being in the lab with the students was an important exercise in modeling, and many commented on how important it was for me to be there and demonstrate that I knew what they were going through. Furthermore, I made many more efforts to use multimedia in teaching. I discovered that modeling had a significant drawback—the students' projects were often influenced by the aesthetics of my models, so that there was oftentimes some—even a great—degree of similarity in the look of the projects. My conclusion to this is that skills and principles can be taught, but not necessarily creativity itself.

Everything that I had learned in the previous two semesters that had resulted in a more integrated syllabus, a graduated acquisition of analytical and multimedia skills, the development of a composition process that included outlining, drafting, pitching, peer evaluation, and revising, and the critical study of previous student multimedia projects resulted in the average quality of the students' multimedia projects going up. By quality, I mean a greater sense of multimedia basics (the logical and design-sensitive use of color, typography, composition, and navigation, as well as a minimum of technical errors) and multimedia formal possibilities (non-linear organization, hyper-text linking, interactivity, and the creative use and adaptation of images, sound, text, and video). The illustrated paper, while still present at the midterm stage, was typically well-executed given the

above criteria; by the final group and individual projects, the illustrated paper had almost vanished, giving way to projects that were more fully realized in terms of using all the above formal possibilities. Interestingly, there was no rise in the number of exceptional projects. The conclusion is that competency can be taught, but again, the more intuitive aspects of creativity and insight cannot.

The constant emphasis on storytelling and creativity in my courses had some interesting results. Students felt constrained, in a multimedia and literature course, in dealing only with literary criticism. Many of the final projects were “cultural studies,” rather than literary studies, using the literary text as a starting point for venturing out into broader cultural analysis; many other projects, taking the demand to be creative quite seriously, engaged in techniques of play and satire that were hard to grade but fun to peruse, such as one project, called asianfetish.com, that satirized the sexual stereotypes that dominant society projects onto Asians and Asian Americans (a topic we studied in a literary and historical context) by presenting an Internet dating service which specialized in such stereotypes. Is this type of work “academic”? One interesting reaction to the project when it was presented to a broader audience than the class was that it was hard for some viewers to tell it was satirical at first glance. Users viewing multimedia, especially on the Internet, are prone to look and move on very rapidly, which leaves multimedia academic projects at a distinct disadvantage, despite even the best efforts to make them user-friendly. But if one takes the time to go through the project in some detail, the academic analysis of stereotypes is present. The implication of the reaction, however, is that multimedia work, especially when it is playful, doesn’t meet conventional academic standards of “seriousness,” and hence, grade-worthiness. What also became obvious was that the fusion of multimedia excellence with analytical excellence could produce brilliant academic work in the conventional sense.

Multimedia as Composition: Some Teaching Design Principles

First principle: Depth, not breadth

One of the most widespread fears of teachers using multimedia is that they will have to cut back on traditional course content. This is a valid concern, but spending more time building analytical and multimedia skills can be quite beneficial. Inevitably, one must cut back on traditional course content; for example, my Asian American literature and multimedia course dealt with only about two-thirds of the reading material that my Asian American literature course dealt with. Simply adding multimedia to an unrevised course will only frustrate students and make them feel even more over-worked than they already will. Likewise, when it comes to teaching technology, having the students learn fewer programs rather than more will be beneficial. Technological demands should be tailored to the course’s content and design; the course concept, in other words, must come first.

Second principle: Define course goals early

As mentioned above, the pedagogical concerns must come before the technological concerns. Technology services pedagogy, rather than vice versa, and it must be integrated conceptually into the course. Therefore, professors should ask at least two questions as they define course goals: how can multimedia transform how I teach in a fundamental way? And how can student work be transformed in a fundamental way?

My course goal was to enhance creativity, both in my teaching and in student work. That goal was embodied in my course question, how do we tell stories about America?

Third principle: Multimedia composition can be taught

The conventional freshman reading and composition course teaches students that writing is a learned skill. So is multimedia composition, which has its own particular demands beyond conventional writing. All the skills of conventional writing must be present for there to be effective multimedia composition, which means that a sense of logic, organization, argumentation, citation, and rhetoric are the basic skills of multimedia composition. Beyond this, multimedia deals with a sense of design concerning color, typography, composition, navigation, and hypertext, as well as the technical basics of particular programs being used.

All these skills can be taught, and should be done so gradually for uninitiated students, in the same way that freshmen learn the particular demands of college writing. Students in my courses started by doing basic exercises such as text and image manipulation, graduate to translating already-written papers into visual arguments that can be like illustrated papers, and finish by taking full advantage of multimedia to produce interactive, nonlinear (if necessary) projects that incorporate not only text and image, but also sound and moving image.

Regardless of whichever trajectory is relevant, some of these techniques should be useful:

1. pitching (where ideas are presented to the professor or class for feedback)
2. storyboarding (the visual equivalent of outlining)
3. drafting (early projects that get feedback)
4. peer evaluation
5. group work (so students can supplement each others' skills)
6. revising (to promote the idea that the project's quality is more important than the grade)

Fourth principle: Multimedia is playfully serious, or seriously playful

Multimedia is inherently creative, although that is no guarantee that the results will be "beautiful" to any given audience. This creative dimension means that a certain kind of joy—beyond that of intellectual inquiry and discovery—can be brought into academic work, as students are allowed a greater degree of freedom and choice in presenting their ideas. With more freedom and choice, the students often have a greater sense of ownership or investment in what they produce, and professors can have a greater sense of pride in what their students produce.

The serious dimension of multimedia is that it can be a vehicle of significant research. Students must be required to perform certain minimal tasks that are expected elsewhere in academia—rigorous research and citation, whichever form these may take for particular disciplines, such as going to archives, conducting interviews, or venturing into communities and doing fieldwork.

Fifth principle: Multimedia is a collective endeavor

Making a multimedia project can be like making a movie. It will require an audience, and it may allude to previous projects/movies, maybe even engaging in homage. In other words, unlike papers, multimedia projects are and should be shareable, an awareness of which transforms student attitudes toward their own work. A paper is disposable and has no public price or reward (of shame, embarrass-

ment, or pride, for example) attached to it. A multimedia project has a public price. It also has a public payoff or reward: students know their work not only draws from various archives, but will be a part of a student-produced archive that later students will view and learn from. Beyond this, many students also show their projects to their friends and families, which almost never happens with a paper.

Since making a multimedia project can be like making a movie, it is an ideal site for group work, since so many different kinds of skills can be required, depending on the project (of course, the auteur theory can also apply to those students who wish to do projects by themselves).

Sixth principle: Multimedia is not for everyone

I am an enthusiastic proponent for multimedia, but it is clearly not suitable for all situations and students. By this, I am referring only to my model of multimedia as a form of creative research and writing, in which the type of thinking that is demanded, which is often intuitive, creative, visual, and non-linear, is a type of thinking that not all students engage in or want to engage in.

Grading: Challenges and Reconsiderations

One of the greatest difficulties with multimedia projects is the question of grading. How do we grade creativity? Is grading creativity inherently subjective? Do we inflate our grades because of our investment in student projects, because we witness just how much time, care and emotion the students pour into their work?

Without invalidating them, these questions can obviously be turned back on the grading of conventional student work in any number of disciplines. Is grading here always objective? How do we grade creativity in traditional disciplines, or are we equally unequipped to do so through subtle and not-so-subtle means of discouraging creativity?

The larger, overarching issue is: what function does a grade serve? Teaching multimedia has transformed my own thinking about grading. What I have discovered is this:

1. At least in the humanities, grading always contains some measure of subjectivity (even though professors will often deny it), whether that be bias for or against certain students for any number of reasons, value judgments on both intellectual content and rhetorical style, theoretical and political differences with students and/or their arguments, and the unclear differentiation between, for example, a B+ and a B.
2. Grades are economical, time-efficient ways of creating norms, encouraging competition, promoting individualism, and imposing uniformity upon populations that are diverse in any number of ways, including ways of thinking; grades used in this fashion therefore save professors labor-time and enhance the university's corporate function, both in relation to students as future job and graduate school candidates, and in relation to professors interested in tenure and promotion.
3. Grades reward results (which can be objectively or subjectively measured), and not processes; hence, grades can serve to discourage experimentation and creativity that may not be "productive."

These forms of grading also serve as a method of discipline. Disciplines are, of course, productive but also constraining. In my concern, what is being constrained is creativity, precisely the thing that grading has such difficulty accounting for.

Therefore, my approach to grading, in the context of creative-oriented situations such as my multimedia courses, has changed in the following ways:

1. I acknowledge subjectivity and bias, both in my own perspective on student work and in the student work itself. Subjectivity and bias can be powerful and not limiting, as they are traditionally perceived in the framework of objectivity and rationality that structures the university as a product and regulator of modernity. My courses specifically, and American studies in general, are very often about identifying the subjectivity and biases that fuel rational enterprises like slavery and colonialism, and the subjectivity and biases that enabled resistant and creative political movements and struggles.

2. Acknowledging this subjectivity and bias, I use peer evaluations to help me gain a wide range of perspectives on student work. Peer evaluation does not displace, but rather supplements, my "expertise"—which is, to a certain extent, a fiction in and of itself. I may know more than the students regarding my particular course content and the theories of multimedia composition, but I may not know more about them in other things, such as life experience, and by the end of the semester, I often know less than they do about the actual technologies of multimedia.

3. Objectivity is still useful. Multimedia grading can have an objective dimension, although that is only one dimension, where technical issues can be assessed, as well as issues of argumentation, use of evidence, depth of research, etc. Aesthetics and political/intellectual/experiential perspectives constitute the more subjective and equally important dimension that point two above helps to address.

4. I turn away from the product-oriented nature of conventional grading toward a process-oriented form of grading. I am more interested in assessing what students have learned over a span of time, not what they can demonstrate learning at a particular moment, and I am more interested in assessing their accomplishments relative to their ambition, curiosity, and creativity, rather than assessing their accomplishments relative to what they think I want—the infamous regurgitation of professorial ideas. To measure process, I encourage revisions, the idea that the work is ongoing and can be changed, for its own benefit, rather than the students' or mine. The possibility of revision allows experimentation and promotes collective work and feedback. In other words, the goal of emphasizing process is, ultimately, to allow the possibility of a better product, not in a utilitarian sense, but in the sense of greater growth and enjoyment on the part of the students who work on the project, and on the part of myself, who has to guide and assess it.

5. I acknowledge that grading is not simply an isolated act without consequences or significance beyond the classroom or some idealized conception of liberal arts education and meritocracy. Grading is symptomatic of the university's corporate nature and function in a larger capitalist society and market economy—hence, my critique of grading and my reconsiderations of how I can grade non-product oriented creative, experimental endeavors.

Obviously, I believe that the introduction of multimedia in non-multimedia disciplines like literature can have a transforming impact on teaching, learning, and even the basic principles that tie conventional academic grading to a larger world of competition and individualism. At the same time, I have

no illusions about multimedia. In as much as it can do all of these things, multimedia's success in the university will be market-driven as much as intellectually-driven, as students from the new digital generation demand it, and as universities recognize that many employers will require multimedia knowledge

Conclusion: Transforming the Teacher

My own pedagogical practice, before I became involved with multimedia, was influenced by the idea that pedagogy could be transformative and liberatory for my students. Although I paid lip service to the idea that I could learn from my students, I never really believed it; nor did I consider how teaching could transform or liberate me. For example, when I was teaching composition as a graduate student, I was rather fatalistic about the obvious constraints involved in teaching students how to write the standard 5-7 page paper. When students asked me why they had to write in such a fashion, I told them that mastering the 5-7 page paper would help them survive college and had practical ramifications in helping them think analytically and write clearly, which could be usable in doing such things as writing business memos or legal briefs. Perhaps I was a limited teacher in not being able to figure out any other particular use for writing a 5-7 page paper. In any event, the first reason was clearly tautological: one learns to write a 5-7 page paper in a university in order to perform more effectively at the university. The second reason was bluntly pragmatic and recognizes the role the university plays in preparing future professionals. What is evident to me now is that I was not transforming myself as a teacher, but learning my function within the university as a reading and composition instructor.

Was I transforming my students? Possibly, although not in the way I intended. This population of students—the non-literature, mostly non-humanities type who come through composition classes—is served in only a limited fashion by the standard reading and composition curriculum when it comes to analytical and writing training. It's no wonder that most students end up hating or at least dreading the act of writing in the academic context. Multimedia is not, to repeat an important point mentioned before, a magic bullet in this regard, namely, the reformation of "writing," broadly defined. In my own experience, it works well for certain kinds of students, but is sometimes too much work—hence, they can dread multimedia composition also, if they aren't given sufficient time and credit for it. Multimedia, however, is a different kind of writing and teaching that is an important alternative at the present moment to conventional writing and its teaching. In addition to not being a cure-all for the problems of teaching writing, multimedia also generates some ambivalence for me in terms of the alternative it offers to the corporate nature of mass composition education and mass grading. In order for multimedia to make inroads into the university, it, too, must be marketed and respond to consumer pressure from students; and it, too, will eventually undergo standardization and its perils that are already evident in mass composition education. Mass composition education, like multimedia, is neither purely disciplinary nor liberatory; but at the present, institutional moment, mass composition education veers more toward discipline, and multimedia more towards liberation.

My experience with multimedia has been one—given the particular circumstances and context—in which I've witnessed student learning to be transformed, as students are allowed to use a variety of tools and media to express themselves critically. For at least half the students, this new option to be critical by being creative and telling stories was a liberatory one that worked well with what they were studying—the power of narrative to creatively fashion representations of American culture, politics, and history. Surprisingly, I, too, was transformed, by being forced to reconsider many of my assumptions or inertia regarding things like grading, teaching methods, and the worth of student work. In thinking through these issues of grading and teaching methods, it seems even more clear to me that they serve particular functions in regard to socialization and the inculcation of an acceptance, on the part

of students, of competitive individualism—sometimes a good thing, sometimes not. The depressing thing about academic education is the relative scarcity of alternatives to such an educational system that purports to be about opening the mind. While we may expose students to all kinds of facts and information (the content), we teach them to think in relatively standard fashion (the form). With my own courses that tried to merge the study and the criticism of form and content, I learned that academic writing and its reward system is, not surprisingly, not too different than student writing and its reward system. Hoping to liberate students, I have a better sense of how to liberate myself from such a system.

One of the ironies of being a professor in the academic system is that the more successful one is at mastering different skills, the less time one has for teaching—at least this is true in my case. Since having taught these three courses, I have not had time to teach any multimedia courses, due to being an administrator, servicing two departments in which I hold joint appointments, teaching in general education, accumulating more graduate students, and being on fellowship leaves. Given these realities and the time-consuming demands of the kind of high-tech multimedia courses I have described, my plan for returning to multimedia involves what might be described as guerilla multimedia—low-tech, cobbled from everyday technologies to which the students would have ready access and some familiarity, and self-conscious of some key issues that I overlooked earlier, namely aesthetics and multidisciplinary. When it comes to low-tech, YouTube, cheap digital cameras, cell phone video, blogs, and ready-to-use websites were barely on the horizon when I taught my courses, but they now form part of the average student's daily environment. So, instead of teaching students how to use very complicated software programs or high-end tech equipment, I would use these technologies and figure out how to tailor my course goals to their capabilities. In one way, teaching students how to be critical and creative with the tools they already have is as valuable as exposing them to new technologies. The pedagogy of composition, after all, is to teach students how to do something critical with a pen, a typewriter, or a computer.

A low-tech course would also make obvious what was transparent in my high-tech courses, namely aesthetics. I took it for granted that student projects needed to hew to certain kinds of design principles, although it made me uneasy when I disagreed with a student who insisted that his project was visually compelling while I thought it was a mess. I would not dispose of aesthetics or simply say that all beauty was relative. Rather, I would design my course so that the students would discuss what constitutes beauty and reflect upon it in the making of their own projects. Debates over beauty and aesthetic value are deeply important to discussions of culture and difference, so the weaving of such discussions into the practice of multimedia projects is logical and complementary. Low-tech projects might be the multimedia equivalent of slam poetry or graffiti—perhaps rough, rebellious, “ugly,” or “amateurish,” but carried out in the spirit of contesting the high aesthetic values that are part of the way a dominant culture exercises its dominance. Disciplinarity is another way that dominance is exerted, this time in the academy, through the segregation of knowledge and faculty. In many ways, disciplinarity makes our lives as faculty easier, by allowing us to think and teach in narrowly defined ways, while inter- or multidisciplinary work both expands our vision and increases our workload. But multimedia by definition requires multidisciplinary approaches, and I would make my course one that reflects upon what it means to “write” in ways that incorporate word, sound, and image.

All of this is to say that the students would inspire a low-tech course as much as the course would hopefully inspire them. My course would point out all the ways that the students are already living multidisciplinary, multimedia lives, via the Internet, graphic novels, viral video, rap music, consumer advertising, and so on. The challenges for the teacher remain the same as they did in the last decade or the last century: to show students how to examine their lives, and to see the world through the eyes of new generations.