

The Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative as an Instructional Tool: Cross-Community Connections and Collaborations

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This article documents the practice and possibilities of using the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative (DRC) website as a pedagogical resource for writing classrooms. First, we outline the goals of the DRC, showcasing the Board's vision of the project and the graduate fellows' efforts to enact that vision. Next, we report on conversations with 2016 Computers and Writing session attendees about possible topics and activities that would bridge the DRC's content and platform with writing classrooms. Finally, we synthesize our discussion into takeaways—simple steps and suggestions that could scaffold a new user's experience with the site while giving experienced site users some fresh ideas about the potential affordances of using digital content from a collaborative online community in their classes.

On its home page, the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative (DRC) positions itself as “a space for shared inquiry into the range of ideas, conversations, and activities that together constitute the work of digital rhetoricians and of the computers and writing community.” The first Blog Carnival asked contributors—Troy Hicks, Kris Blair, Cheryl Ball, Jonathan Alexander, Derek Mueller, Jentery Sayers, Melanie Yergeau, Liz Losh, and Claire Lauer—to respond to the question: What does digital rhetoric mean to me? Their posts represent interests in digital natives, digital publishing, kairotic composing, identity representation, circulation networks, surveillance, big data, disability, disciplinary identity, and terminology. These posts point to the variety and unity in conceptions of digital rhetoric and in the computers and writing community. Liz Losh (2012) observed in her post that “any book about this subject quickly becomes outdated,” a problem that Doug Eyman (2012) hoped the DRC would address:

But this is where this project—the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative—comes in: it's a way to bring together a number of disciplines and scholars and their work that isn't limited to the time-bound form of the book. It is an instantiation of the ethos of digital rhetoric—the formation of a habitual gathering place for a specific community of rhetors.

The site continues to reach for this early vision, gathering content and contributors from a range of disciplinary orientations to think together about what it means to engage in or with digital rhetorics. This gathering place relies on readers and contributors brought together by its graduate fellows.

In 2013, the DRC launched its Graduate Fellows program. (This is where we come in!) Each academic year, the Graduate Associate coordinates a group of four to six graduate fellows who attend monthly online meetings and take responsibility for proposing new content, managing regular features of the site, reaching out to contributors, and facilitating collaborative events. The site has produced Blog Carnivals and Conference Reviews from its inception, and the first cohort of graduate fellows was charged with developing new features and generating a consistent posting schedule, giving readers and contributors regular opportunities to think through what it means to be a digital rhetorician and to rhetorically parse digital texts. They introduced the Webtext of the Month feature, which looks closely at the rhetorical composition, critical content, and collaborative labor involved in producing digital texts, and they created the Hack & Yack series to review tools, offer practical advice on using technology to support pedagogy, and explore theoretical lines of inquiry about technology's role in composition and communication. The second cohort focused on reaching out to the broader digital rhetoric community, and fellows took responsibility for promoting content on Facebook and Twitter and making connections to other online communities interested in advancing the practice and theory of digital rhetoric. They experimented with Pinterest boards, streamlined procedures for contributing to the DRC Wiki, and

facilitated Twitter chats and Google Hangouts. As they designed these projects, fellows drew on local interests and faculty expertise at their home institutions, which ultimately led to the third cohort's project: reaching out to classrooms. The third-year fellows began redesigning the site to make posts easier to access by topic and theme in hopes that streamlining access to information would make it easier for members of the community to think about how to use the wealth of materials now available. They began posting a bi-weekly roundup of topics to relevant listservs. They solicited digital lesson plans and coordinated with faculty who designed opportunities for their undergraduate students to contribute to the DRC Wiki (Davis, 2016).

The 2015-2016 graduate fellows saw the 2016 Computers and Writing conference as an opportunity to solicit feedback on how the DRC site had been used in classrooms and to explore suggestions for what might make it more useful and user-friendly. Paula Miller, a graduate fellow at the time, explains in her reflection on the workshop:

While in previous years, we focused inward, exploring how we cultivate and maintain the blog to serve the CW community, this year's focus was collaborative and focused outward, exploring how we can serve the community, how teacher-scholars can engage with and use the site for teaching and research. (Miller, 2016)

In light of this goal, the Sweetland DRC graduate fellows facilitated a breakout, brainstorm, and build workshop designed to revitalize standard uses of the DRC and to generate new approaches. Approximately 30 participants contributed to small group discussions and a collaborative Google doc in response to five organizing questions:

- How can we create a lesson plan that promotes collaborative writing?
- How can we create a lesson plan that promotes critical tool use?
- How can we create a lesson plan that promotes social justice and activism on the Web?
- How can we create a lesson plan that promotes multimodal project production?
- How can we create a lesson plan that promotes visual design thinking?

What follows is a brief summary and synthesis of the questions, concerns, and suggestions that surfaced in these small groups.

Discussion

Promoting Collaborative Writing

Merideth Garcia, DRC graduate associate, facilitated Group 1, which focused on collaborative writing and quickly took a turn into conceptual work and meta-conversations about the challenges of writing together. For example, the group spent several minutes at the beginning of the breakout session discussing how participants could contribute to the Google doc in ways that would document their work. A group member suggested “To keep track of who’s putting what parts into the document, when you’re writing together, you might want to use suggest mode: gives everyone a different color.” As contributors went into suggesting mode, we realized that some of us appeared as anonymous, so we also created a roll listing all our names and institutions. This point is worth belaboring a bit—collaborative writing requires a level of trust that calls for transparency and recognition. Every person present contributed to the discussion, some made notes in the doc, some of the note-makers were named and others were anonymous. When we engage in and assign collaborative writing, how do we support and value *all* of these kinds of participation?

This opening discussion led us to think about our roles in the group and our roles in the writing. We asked ourselves: “What *is* collaborative writing?” Three types emerged from our conversation

- Creating together
- Archive or repository
- Wiki - creating and editing

(see Kittle & Hicks, 2009, for a similar framework and technology recommendations). We noted that often when we ask students to write collaboratively, we have a vision of them creating together,

exchanging ideas and information, writing and receiving feedback from each other in ways that amplify and streamline the work. Perhaps it does work this way sometimes, but often the final product reads more like a repository or archive. Like jigsaw activities, one person takes section 1, another section 2, and so on. Multimodal work seems especially prone to this kind of division of labor as group members take charge of different modes (one selecting the visuals, another providing the audio, and another generating the text). Sometimes a single person is appointed to stitch together these disparate pieces, but just as often, the pieces sit together without much to connect them, leaving small archives of students' approaches to a shared topic. This archive or repository type isn't necessarily a bad thing; as the second type of collaborative writing we discussed, it is sometimes the design. For example, blog posts that address a common set of readings, videos that address a course theme, and visual representations of different narrative moments in a shared text would all meet this composing goal. The third type we identified was a Wiki model where students post writing that is open to revision or extension by others. This might take the form of shared class notes or contributions to an actual Wiki.

The DRC offers examples of all three of these types (and probably others that we did not identify in our brief time together), and we agreed that an important, and perhaps overlooked, aspect of collaborative writing assignments was understanding and discussing with students what model of collaborative writing was desired in a given situation. These kinds of conversations could go a long way toward addressing many of the issues raised in our discussion, such as student anxieties about working in groups, the potential barriers raised by requiring logins or accounts, and structuring the division of labor and methods of crediting collaborators. Participants suggested that depending on the type of collaborative writing activity, students could create a multimodal project to address a Blog Carnival theme (creating together); they could review an edited collection on digital rhetoric, with each chapter covered by an individual or pair of students (archive or repository); or they could select a section of the DRC Wiki to build out as a class (Wiki).

Promoting Critical Tool Use

DRC Fellow Jenae Cohn facilitated conversation in Group 2, which focused on ideas for building lesson plans that promoted critical tool use. This group defined critical tool use as student engagement with digital tools that promoted critical thinking and reflection; that is, the group considered how digital tools could be brought into the writing classroom in pedagogically sound and thoughtful ways, as opposed to adopting the tools simply for the sake of adopting new tools. The group decided on several key goals for bringing critical tool use into the writing classroom: we want to encourage students and instructors alike to explore new ways of thinking, to streamline students' development in learning new tools, and to help students re-think how platform and tool choices impact communication and design principles.

To follow, this group developed several ideas for how to meet these goals with the DRC's resources. First, the group focused on the ways in which the DRC's Wiki could potentially support our goals. In particular, the group suggested adding a section for writing-related Tool Reviews that may be of interest to future instructors and administrators. We also thought that the Wiki could include a list of books or resources about enacting digital rhetoric in the classroom; these resources would be different from the book recommendations that currently exist in the Wiki because, rather than focusing on theories of digital rhetorics, they would focus on texts that offered more extensive "how-to" and/or teaching guides.

This conversation led to some discussion of what, exactly, prevents students and instructors alike from adopting tools critically: fear of failure. Indeed, failure emerges from ambition, and the group determined that, as writing classrooms work more to adopt new tools and technologies, it is worth encouraging instructors to facilitate transparent conversations about the distinctions between productive and unproductive failure. One way the group proposed having these conversations is through sharing stories of failure. In particular, the group thought that a future Blog Carnival topic on the DRC could be dedicated to submissions about failure, with guiding questions like, "How did you and your students feel

encouraged to try new tools even as the tools might have broken or failed?” “How did you make your failures productive?” and “How did you make the tools work for you as an instructor?”

Some of these questions also made the group wonder about ways that the DRC could support instructors who may feel wary about adopting new tools but recognize the importance of bringing critical tool use into their classes. The group brainstormed a few other concrete resources that a space like the DRC could support, like a Getting Started with the DRC guide that would help instructors determine how they could take advantage of the many resources the DRC already has available to help instructors navigate both practices and theories of digital rhetoric. The group also considered adding a glossary to the DRC that would help instructors who are new to teaching with digital tools learn some of the basic terms and concepts that might help them pick appropriate tools for their classes. For example, some new instructors might not yet know the difference between synchronous and asynchronous tools or what a cloud-based or LTI compatible tool might mean for their teaching. Ultimately, we concluded that promoting critical tool use in the classroom is just as much about embracing possibilities for exploration as it is embracing the inevitability of failure. We acknowledged that there is much work to be done in inviting new people into conversations about tool use, but that the possibilities for doing this work in a space like the DRC are compelling.

Promoting Social Justice and Activism

Group 3, led by DRC Fellow Paula Miller, considered the social justice possibilities of using the DRC. These included proposing a series that the class might create for publication on the DRC site, having students explore and evaluate their own digital identity/ies and online activism, and promoting collaboration across institutions, bridging demographic and experiential gaps through public-faced writing. This conversation surfaced the necessarily public nature of writing for social justice and positioned the DRC as a welcoming space for faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and nonacademic members of the community to share their work in an open-access space. One question raised was “How do communities live beyond academic-endorsed time?” Participants wrestled with the difficulties of building on the foundations created in a course and suggested that making opportunities for students to grow their professional networks, perhaps by developing publishing opportunities in collaboration with DRC graduate fellows, can be an important factor in building relationships that extend across communities.

When brainstorming lesson ideas, discussion turned to a 2015 Blog Carnival that specifically addressed social justice and gaming. A lesson idea that emerged included asking students to play games that engage social justice issues. One such lesson plan might ask students to create avatars and then interrogate the choices they made regarding race, gender, and appearance. This could include discussions of students’ prior experiences with race, gender, and appearance that influenced the creation of the avatars. Then a more critical reflection of those discussions would be to consider such questions as “What makes an avatar masculine or feminine?” (see Lee, 2015). Alternatively, a lesson could be built around having students document their decisions as they play through a game that involves narrative choices. Students could then use their decisions in the game to reflect on social justice issues that are apparent, inherent, or latent in the narrative (see Custer, 2015). Participants were enthusiastic about using the DRC both as a resource and a partner that could potentially provide a venue to publish the work students generated in their courses.

Promoting Multimodal Project Production

Group 4 was led by Naomi Silver, associate director of the Sweetland Center for Writing. The group focused on the question: “How can we create a lesson plan that promotes multimodal project production?” This group organized the discussion around sub-questions generated collaboratively. One sub-question focused on curating tools and materials in a teacher-friendly way to promote sharing amongst the group, and participants discussed the affordances and limitations of both a static, dedicated site and a more flexible tagging system. Additionally, the group considered other means for facilitating

conversations between teachers about the lesson plans they might produce for multimodal project production. There was a great deal of conversation about which platforms were best suited for different kinds of synchronous and asynchronous conversations about lesson plans, specifically relating to multimodal and digital rhetoric, with special consideration of how time constraints shape possibilities. This brought up more questions about how and when particular platforms—like Twitter, Facebook, and the DRC blog—might be the best way to keep a conversation engaging and trackable.

Although most of the conversation was directed towards teacher practices, the group also discussed how to craft a lesson plan for multimodal project production. One question we considered was how teachers could direct students to production tools, and we agreed that both the DRC Blog Carnivals that feature particular tools and the specific Tool Reviews serve as useful introductions to various tools to facilitate multimodal project production. Similarly, the group considered integrating small activities where students could practice and experiment with the tools they might use for their projects. We also discussed the importance of incorporating task-based frameworks to help facilitate multimodal project production (see Shipka, 2011). Overall, the group came to a consensus that in order to craft lesson plans around multimodal project production, teachers need frameworks for incorporating tools and approaching them from a rhetorical and writing studies standpoint. Furthermore, there is a need for more of what Stuart Selber (2004) called “functional literacy,” which he conceptualizes as paired attention to both the nuts-and-bolts of how to use computers and to critical consideration of the computer-as-a-tool metaphor (p. 35).

Promoting Visual Design Thinking

Brandy Dieterle, DRC Fellow, facilitated Group 5, which focused on the question “How can we create a lesson plan that promotes visual design thinking?” Much of the time in this group was spent studying the question further, specifically the phrase “visual design thinking.” Participants wanted to define this phrase before proceeding, and our definitions were focused around usability and the arrangement of the page, genres (e.g., memes), visual rhetoric, and design aspects of professional writing. Once the group came to an agreement on how we could define and think about the phrase “visual design thinking,” we turned our attention to crafting assignments we could create lesson plans for. The group briefly discussed two different assignments directed at promoting visual design thinking: 1) using the same caption with different photos to create memes and then determining how the changes impact the message being conveyed, and 2) translating an alphanumeric text to a visual genre.

With regards to the first assignment discussed, the group spent some time thinking through what this type of assignment might look like, and that is where we came up with the primary question that would guide this assignment and discussion: How does the same caption on different photos impact meaning? To prepare students for the visual design thinking that would be crucial for completing this assignment, we discussed what scaffolding practices students would need experience with beforehand. Specifically, students would need to learn how to read an image rhetorically, and also how to read a text visually. Other specific points the group discussed were: working with students to understand both overt and hidden meanings in a meme, the context of a meme, the media that is used and being referenced, and the audience. Furthermore, the group brainstormed ways that the DRC’s resources could assist in this. There are several blog posts that discuss multimodal composing, but there are also a few that directly reflect on meme-writing that would be useful for students to gain a more critical understanding of working with memes. Additionally, the group noted that there was a page on the DRC Wiki devoted to memes where students could be directed to get a Wiki-esque definition of the term.

The second assignment we discussed was a bit more generic in that we focused on an assignment that involved students taking a previously written alphanumeric essay and translating that assignment into a new, visual genre. The group started by brainstorming what would be needed to help students complete such a task, and then worked on arranging that information in a step-by-step guide for crafting a lesson plan. To scaffold student learning for this assignment, the group decided that we would start by introducing the idea of visual design thinking and threshold concepts, using the DRC Wiki as a resource.

Next, we would showcase models and technologies to help students gain a sense of what this process looks like and what the possibilities are. After taking these initial steps, the group decided that students should write a proposal for their visual genre that elaborates on the specific tools and concepts they would be engaging with for the assignment. Next, students would engage in workshop activities to help them continue working on their projects. Finally, students would submit their projects and complete a reflection, using the DRC as a resource to explain their rationale as well as to gain terminology to use in their reflections. Like the other assignment discussed here, the group reiterated the importance of helping students learn to read visuals and texts critically.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the workshop, the groups shared their observations, and the DRC fellows opened the floor for conversation. The need for more time to plan and think together was a common theme. Several groups expressed having a difficult time crafting a lesson plan without a particular assignment in mind, suggesting that future iterations of this type of workshop would benefit from advance contact/co-planning with participants. In a basic way, this workshop served to introduce participants to the content available while brainstorming possibilities for its productive use in their classrooms, and there was a great deal of interest and excitement from participants about what they learned about the DRC in our short time together.

In turn, the graduate fellows were excited to hear about what participants wanted most from the DRC, especially in terms of facilitating its use in their classrooms. While pedagogical resources and lesson plans have appeared on the DRC site from the earliest posts, some in attendance pointed out that it can be difficult to parse through these materials to find concrete suggestions. Participants suggested that the DRC consider developing a dedicated part of the website to sharing resources for teachers that would help bring visibility to materials that focused on application in classrooms. These suggestions led to the development of more precise categorization strategies on the site and to a recent Blog Carnival focused specifically on teaching (see Easter & West, 2017).

In addition, because each group took up questions of definition, application, access, relevance, and assessment, we offer four takeaways that we believe will help users enter and further these critical conversations:

- Definition work is ongoing. Send students to the DRC to summarize, synthesize, and extend definitions of relevant terms and practices.
- Have students review the tools that they use to create their multimodal projects, focusing on how the tool rhetorically shapes the product.
- Have students read and evaluate current Blog Carnival topics and make suggestions that reflect their questions about digital rhetoric and their commitments to social justice in online and face-to-face spaces.
- If you develop a unit (or course!) using DRC content, contact a graduate fellow to discuss publishing your lesson plan(s) and reflections written by you and/or your students.

As these takeaways suggest, our brief discussion of the possibilities for using the DRC as a tool for teaching and supporting collaboration across affiliations is just a piece of the larger project of promoting a community of digital rhetors by providing space for practice, analysis, and reflection. We hope this article will encourage readers to explore the DRC as a resource for teaching and to reach out to the Fellows with ideas for fostering collaboration that supports student and faculty publication on the site.

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