



Speaking with Students: Profiles in Digital Pedagogy

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Introduction

The Honors in Multimedia Scholarship Program

Founded in 1998, the Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) is an organized research unit dedicated to developing educational programs and conducting research on the changing nature of literacy in a networked culture. Although its institutional home is the School of Cinematic Arts, the IML supports faculty research and curricula that seek to transform the nature of scholarship within the disciplines. The Honors in Multimedia Scholarship program is an university-wide undergraduate program located at the IML; it received official sanction and began enrolling its first cohort in Fall 2004, basing the curriculum on the previous six years of experience deploying multimedia scholarship in courses across the USC campus. The Honors program was the first of several academic programs launched by the IML.

In 2006, the IML, in collaboration with USC's College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, created the Multimedia in the Core Program which unites General Education courses with multimedia labs, offering all USC students the opportunity to explore new forms of scholarly expression. The following year, the Multimedia Across the College Program was created; here, upper division courses are paired with multimedia instruction, allowing students to investigate media-based forms of scholarly research and production. This year (2009), the IML's Minor in Digital Studies was approved which expanded the course offering further. IML courses now include everything from photo-essays to Web-based documentaries, from interactive videos to sophisticated Web sites, and from kinetic typography to 3-D visualizations. All IML courses include a hands-on lab component, in addition to a theoretical foundation borne of critical studies, semiotics, cinema studies, composition and rhetorical theory.

Like all IML academic programs, the Honors program is both reactive and proactive in relation to digital technologies for expression and communication. That is to say, while the idea is to identify and engage new media and the emerging practices they engender, the program is explicitly designed to be transformative in that it hopes to teach a new generation of scholars to enhance traditional academic practices through multimedia. The Honors program stands apart from other IML programs, however, in that its goal is advanced digital literacy. As such, the program culminates in the creation of a media-rich, digital thesis project. Honors cohorts are small (15-25 students per year) and they are well supported both technologically and conceptually. Students take IML440 and IML444 during their senior year, where they plan and execute these projects which are grounded in their disciplinary major. Each student has two faculty advisors, one from the IML, and one from their major and this ensures the type of student-faculty interaction that aids their scholarship, and allows us to be pedagogically responsive.

The Multimedia Thesis

The first Honors cohort completed their thesis projects in 2008 and the second in 2009; the planning and execution of these projects is the topic of these student profiles. The students featured here are mainly from the inaugural class, and graduated with the Honors designation in 2008 (they are filmed against a green background). There are also two students from the 2009 cohort (they are pictured against blue-gray draping). One of the greatest challenges of creating these projects is that there are few models for scholarly multimedia. Born-digital work requires us to consider the ability to explore issues with the sort of depth that comes from deploying the registers of text, image and interactivity, while it also has the potential to involve the reader/viewer in unprecedented ways. As scholars (both

teachers and students), we must ask ourselves what we can do with digital media that we could not do otherwise, but we must also avoid uncritically adopting the conventions of commercial or entertainment media.

Since the goal of the Honors program is to be both academic and innovative, we did not want to impose generic conventions on the projects students might create, feeling that this might limit them. At the same time, we needed to be sure we retained the type of rigor appropriate to academic endeavors. Thus, the thesis parameters, conceived by the planning team, and updated by its program directors (Steve Anderson, from 2004 to 2006, and Virginia Kuhn from 2007 to the present), provide a way to ensure standards, while encouraging transformation and enhancement of scholarship in light of emergent technologies. These parameters are presented and discussed throughout the process of planning and executing their projects and, in this way, students gain the ability to articulate and defend the choices made in their work.

Speaking with Students: The Webtext

This webtext features students discussing their work. This reflective aspect is valuable on many levels, and documenting and sharing such reflection in this webtext is equally vital. Here's why:

Media Variety

The digital archive able to house projects that cross numerous platforms does not exist. These projects run the gamut from 3D environments built in the virtual world of Second Life, to the weighty files of a Korsakow filmic database, to animated Flash-based webtexts, to sophisticated Sophie projects. Storing numerous file types in an online archive requires conversion into some uniform format which will limit functionality. Perhaps more profoundly though, the rise of social networking stimulates a sense of collaborative dynamism — we want reader feedback, user input, and viewer-generated content that extends and reinforces our efforts. And while this impulse may merely highlight the fact that academic work is always part of a larger conversation, the responsibility for maintaining the dynamic portion of digital work is problematic. Standards are difficult to establish since applications are perpetually evolving. Further, many digital objects will have several iterations depending on

how a viewer might access them, particularly with new mobile content which requires a different sort of optimization than, say, a standard webtext.

Application Obsolescence

With no standards for maintenance, old applications will not run in just a few short years, making archiving whole projects increasingly untenable (even as algorithms that revert to earlier operating systems are gaining some ground). These videos offer insight into the process as much as the product. UCLA's Howard Besser suggests that archivists must shift their mindset from saving completed works to asset management. Given the demand for ancillary materials (outtakes, scripts, storyboards), Besser suggests archivists should focus on "saving a side body of materials that contextualize a work" (14). For our purposes, capturing a snapshot of student work while they contextualize it makes complete sense — the video format is fairly stable and self-contained. Moreover, institutionalized curricula cannot hope to keep up with the rapidly evolving applications that arise in the Web 2.0 world and so we must teach students *how* to learn rather than *what* to learn. These pieces lend critical insight into students' processes while they give the IML a uniform repository that provides a model for students and faculty alike. For even as digital scholarship is on the rise, there remains a dearth of models on which to base such efforts. In cases where the student has opted to maintain their work online, urls are given.

Assessment

Although it is unpopular to discuss grading, at least at the faculty level, since that is the terrain of the "bean counters," we ignore our institutional constraints at our peril. Not only is it a disservice to students to fail to inform them of the criteria by which they will be judged — their financial aid, scholarships, or membership in certain student groups often depends upon maintaining a certain GPA — given its relative newness, digital work is subject to the charge of lack of academic rigor. Without the sustained analysis that comes from assessment criteria, digital work can be dismissed as bells and whistles. These criteria give us a lexicon with which to discuss digital work among ourselves and our students, even as explaining digital work in language that is familiar to traditional academics helps them appreciate its nuances and sophistication. And although institutional constraints can prove frustrating, this is something

that academic institutions do well: they force a type of rigor that pushes us toward excellence. At the IML we feel our project parameters help to highlight aspects that may not be immediately apparent in the piece itself — they approach each project on its own terms. As such, there is far more freedom to be innovative with emerging platforms, while maintaining high quality work.

In creating the student profiles, we decided that a running time of roughly five minutes would be optimal. Much longer video profiles could have easily been created given the scholarly depth of the projects and their thickness in terms of the multitude of layers of visual, aural and textual elements contained in each. In addition, the student interviews covered a range of topics related to the production of their thesis projects, from initial inspiration, to design and implementation, to the students' subjective response to their completed work. We also asked them to discuss how their work in scholarly multimedia has impacted their undergraduate education and how it has shaped their future educational and professional goals. We had a wealth of materials from which to build these profiles, which heightened the challenge before us: how do we maintain the integrity of the students' projects and their unique voices within a five minute timeframe? We had to address key issues concerning the representation of students and their work in creating these profiles. In doing so, we are moved to consider best practices for documenting multimedia pedagogy, student experience and scholarly digital work. The *Notes on Process* section accompanying the student profiles illuminates key issues faced in creating these profiles and the strategies used to address them. Whereas many of these strategies are grounded in formal techniques of documentary production, they are deployed in deliberate and specific ways to highlight the scholarly and aesthetic nuances particular to each project.

In order to visually represent the depth of the issues involved in this Flash-based webtext, we created a type of layering effect by allowing traces of one page or screen to remain behind another. While reading one screen, a viewer might see the ghost of a video from the previous screen still playing. The color gradation was very deliberately adjusted in order to keep the text legible, even in the presence of these traces. We believe this feature of the webtext serves as a reminder of the type of depth that is emerging in digital technologies both in and out of the confines of the computer.

We feel that these students are pioneers in the area of digital scholarship and deserve to be documented in ways that are typically reserved for faculty. However, we do understand that no interview, no film, whether edited inside or outside of the camera, is ideologically neutral. We have framed students in a particular way and have created these five minutes, from the hour or so of interview footage each student gave, in order to tell a particular story. We hope the story is one the student sees as valid — and, indeed, all students have been quite pleased with their piece, often using them on job and graduate school applications — but we also understand the extent to which students tell us what we want to hear. Our only way to reconcile these issues is full disclosure: we have a vested interest in this program, these students and their work. To mitigate our bias however, we have adopted Norman Denizen's approach to the construct of the "interview" as a form. Throughout the process of filming, editing and writing about these interviews we have sought to make them "reflexive, dialogic [and] performative" (24) such that by creating them, we are "learning to use language in a way that brings people together" (24) rather than commodifying these students and their work for our own purposes. We hope you find these pieces as stimulating and productive as we do.

Virginia Kuhn is the Associate Director in charge of the Honors in Multimedia Scholarship program at the IML. Her work centers on the ways in which the affordances of digital technologies impact thought, discourse and expression in a highly mediated world. DJ Johnson has been the video documentarian for the IML since 2003. An award-winning filmmaker, Johnson has extensive experience producing and directing documentaries and promotional videos for educational institutions and social service organizations. David Lopez is an Interactivity Designer for the IML. For over five years, he has consistently worked to facilitate multimedia results from raw scholarly enquiry.

Works Cited

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- Denizen, Norman. "The reflexive interview and a performative social science," in *Qualitative Research*, Vol 1, No. 1, 23-46 (2001).



USC Institute for Multimedia Literacy Project Parameters

These are the parameters by which the thesis project is gauged. Students are given these criteria early on, and can therefore plan accordingly. These parameters are flexible enough to allow student innovation, but rigorous enough to ensure academic excellence. Each of the four areas is subdivided into three nuanced categories, and within the webtext you will find clips that demonstrate the ways students have met them.

Conceptual Core

The project's controlling idea must be apparent.

The project must be productively aligned with one or more multimedia genres.

The project must effectively engage with the primary issue/s of the subject area into which it is intervening.

Research Component

The project must display evidence of substantive research and thoughtful engagement with its subject matter.

The project must use a variety of credible sources and cite them appropriately.

The project ought to deploy more than one approach to an issue.

Form & Content

The project's structural or formal elements must serve the conceptual core.

The project's design decisions must be deliberate, controlled, and defensible.

The project's efficacy must be unencumbered by technical problems.

Creative Realization

The project must approach the subject in a creative or innovative manner.

The project must use media and design principles effectively.

The project must achieve significant goals that could not be realized on paper.