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Playing Out Social Action: Game Based Learning and Visual Rhetorical Analysis

Introduction

As writing instructors in required composition classrooms, we have substantial

freedom in the selection of content for our courses. We have both found ourselves using

materials that deal with content related to social justice, current events, global issues,

and controversies for a variety of pedagogical reasons, but the learning objectives of our

courses that revolve around helping our students develop communication skills are best

served when our students see communication as meaningful action. Carolyn R. Miller's

explanation of genre is a great example of how we can think about the conventions we

are teaching as enabling our students to act. She argues that genre is "a classification

based in rhetorical practice…and organized around situated actions" (155). This view of

genre and rhetoric privileges the purpose of communication instead of the form of the

communication. As we select readers and assignments for our students each semester,

we have the opportunity, and obligation, to consider the types of voices we are

privileging, and the types of action we are promoting.

An additional challenge that we face when assigning texts in a composition

classroom is that the ideas in the texts can become separated from, and secondary to,

the goals of the course. We bring in provocative and insightful writers, only to have our

students quickly move on to the next task. Sure, we can have them respond to the authors, but that may leave some of our students in the position of writing to satisfy us that they have read. We don't really need our students to tell us what the reading was about because we read the texts too. Instead, we hope to find ways to have our students engage the ideas and perspectives represented by the texts.

Also, we are aware that many of our students may struggle with thinking outside of their own perspective, or at least may be resistant. We want our students to see the existence, variety, and importance of diverse perspectives as well as why differing views of the world persist. Taylor et al. argue that, "As institutions of higher education become more diverse, there is a heightened obligation to implement educational programs that prioritize reflective learning about self as well as learning about perspectives other than one's own" (231), and we clearly agree. However, authors Leonard et al. explain that, "The word 'diversity' is politically charged, and biases and preconceptions will precede students'...acceptance of diversity as a legitimate area of scholarship" (56). If we as instructors want to bring these conversations into the classroom, then it is important that we set up an environment where students have tools to explore these concepts without becoming prematurely recalcitrant.

Giving students a chance to explore these issues in our courses requires us to think through ways of inviting students to explore and understand. Within a game, instructors can address these (sometimes delicate) issues while students have a chance to seriously consider new or unfamiliar perspectives. Within our game, we present multiple scenarios that require visual analysis, all of which include issues of social

justice and inclusion. In doing so, we demonstrate how teacher made instructional materials can employ invitational rhetoric to encourage a receptive stance from students that will enable a better understanding of the diversity of perspectives as well as a deeper understanding of rhetorical theory.

Inviting Perspectives

As teachers, we may become focused on the use of rhetorical theory to teach students how to write. But we need to remember that rhetorical theory offers more than basic tools for analyzing and producing essays. Our goal may be to educate, but we must still carefully consider our own contexts as we use the classroom to communicate ideas. We use rhetorical theory to discuss a whole range of communicative acts. In fact, our own activities in the classroom can, and should, be analyzed through a rhetorical lens. More specifically, we can consider the instructional materials we use and produce and their rhetorical design. Teaching and learning are inherently rhetorical, and so are the strategies we use as teachers.

When students enter our classrooms, they understand their role to be that of a student. Being aware of the classroom power dynamic has implications for their ability as writers, as David Bartholmae explained, "They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." And this, understandably, causes problems" (5). The process of taking on the identity of expert in a piece of writing is an uncomfortable prospect for students who are trying to become a part of a conversation.

The problem is likely exacerbated when the course content involves perspectives and experiences that are difficult to relate to.

As we prepare our students to enter into conversation with our disciplines and we ask them to take seriously the perspectives of people who see the world differently, we may find particularly useful rhetorical framework in the idea of "Invitational Rhetoric." Sonja K Foss and Cindy L. Griffin offer invitational rhetoric as a counterpoint for traditional forms of rhetoric that are grounded in the need to change, and therefore control, others (Foss and Griffin 4). This focus on persuasion, at its root, reflects a patriarchal, oppressive bias. The form of rhetoric that is focused on winning at all costs matches a form of teaching that provides answers more often than questions.

Their suggestion of invitational rhetoric is, "…built on the principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (4-5). In practical terms, invitational rhetoric is focused on building increasing levels of understanding, rather than on convincing one side to accept the arguments of the other. In the classroom, an invitational approach would encourage students to participate in their own processes of knowledge construction.

The principles that Foss and Griffin mention affirm the vast array of experiences that the audience brings into the communication context. Through this affirmation, the space in which communication takes place becomes a safe environment of exploration, rather than a platform for debate. We know that all students, from the loudest to the most introverted, will benefit from being able to engage the ideas of the whole classroom instead of letting a few voices control the direction of open discussion. The authors

define invitational rhetoric as, "...an invitation to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does" (5). This is not a mission to adopt the rhetor's position, or see the rhetor as ultimately "correct", but rather a method of valuing experience. Invitational rhetoric works as a call to understanding rather than a demand for agreement. It creates a space that accounts for students', "...different stages in [their] development of intercultural sensitivity" (Martin 135).

Listening to the Text

One strategy for having students overcome the impulse to judge perspectives that they don't agree with is to ask them to temporarily suspend disbelief about views they don't agree with. Peter Elbow calls this type of activity the "Believing Game," and he argues that we can help "students learn better to *dwell in*, *enter in*, or *experience* a multiplicity of views or texts--even views that seem uncongenial or contradictory" (394). Elbow's attempts to treat belief and skepticism as equal tools in critical engagement is an admirable strategy for helping students see the importance of taking seriously ideas they encounter. Ultimately, however, because the believing game is part of a framework of 'critical thinking' and is placed on par with skepticism, the goal of the believing game still lends itself to a type of evaluation where we make decisions about the 'right' perspective.

Invitational rhetoric's principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination can break down barriers that traditional rhetoric leaves intact. For example, since the goal of these principles is fostering understanding, it leaves space for frequently marginalized voices to be heard. For those not representing a marginalized

group, these principles help ensure that they are not automatically cast as the "villain" in the communication. We believe that if we use invitational rhetoric in our approach to the classroom, we will be better positioned to encourage what Krista Ratcliffe refers to as *rhetorical listening*, a way of actively providing "grounds for revising identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance" (19). Ratcliffe explains that listening to a text differs from reading a text because we are encouraged to find "the exiled excess and contemplate ite relation to our culture and our selves" (25). We are asked, in other words, to understand the ideas as contextually situated and meaningful.

Asking our students to do more than read requires a way of thinking about text that Ratcliffe's ideas can help us understand. We don't want our students to subsume all perspectives into a homogenous set of experiences, which means that we need to place students where non-identification is part of attending to the text. Ratcliffe writes,

> What's important in the processes of non-identification, however, is that people recognize the partiality of our visions and listen for that-which can-not-be-seen, even if it cannot yet be heard. Although the tactic of listening rhetorically in metonymic places of non-identification cannot guarantee successful results in every situation, the concept of non-identification is important to rhetoric and composition studies because it maps a place, a possibility, for consciously asserting our agency to engage cross-cultural rhetorical exchanges across both commonalities *and* differences. Such a performance of rhetorical listening makes hearing a possibility; in turn, hearing provides a ground for action motivated by accountability. (73)

What we see in Ratcliffe's work is a need to highlight incompatible views and experiences, perspectives that diverge in substantial ways. Amy S. Gerald, a white woman who reviewed Ratcliffe's book, explains, "If white readers listen rhetorically to this discourse, they can pay attention to their reaction to not being privileged in order to realize their own privilege" (144). The goal, again, is not to 'try on' marginalized points

of view, but instead to hear and understand the perspectives being expressed. We don't need our students to identify with every author or perspective represented in our course materials, but if we want them to understand the contextual and interactive nature of rhetoric and communication, then we need them to see that communicative acts can be (rightly) understood through multiple perspectives.

Game Time

In our pursuit to encourage students to hear and understand the importance of serious public discourse, we decided to bring game based learning (GBL) into the classroom in order to supplement the visual rhetorical analysis unit. Students need to know how to "read" visuals, in order to produce culturally aware, responsible visuals themselves. As teachers, we are responsible for providing instructional materials that encourage students to understand and practice rhetorical analysis in meaningful ways. We want to encourage our students to understand rhetorical listening as an approach to topics they don't understand, and we want to invite them into a collaborative learning space where meaningful communication is taking place.

Because context, purpose, and perspectives are inherent features, games align well with invitational rhetoric and rhetorical listening. Games ask players to join in, and they entice players to work within the set of rules offered. By having players enter the boundaries of the game, our game asks players to think like rhetoricians. Players must confront the design choices involved in producing the posters (as visual arguments). Additionally, we are inviting them to listen to the existing social issues represented by the content and stories through immersive play.

Play has been an important element of education theory for a long time. Moments of play are particularly important for learning, as L. S. Vygotsky explains, "play creates a zone of proximal development...in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself...play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form" (102). Vygotsky is explaining that in play, we have strive to do more than we otherwise can. When a child plays 'pretend' they are learning what it is like to be someone else with the knowledge and skills they are imitating. Taking on the identity of expert in the classroom is a challenge that many students struggle with, and when ideas seem too foreign and uninviting, there is no opportunity for learning. If we find ways to invite our students in instead of demand their acceptance of disciplinary knowledge, we may have better results.

The zone of proximal development, an educational theory developed by Vygotsky, relies on the notion that "Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities" (88). The spaces that we create need to encourage a form of exploration where students can imitate skills and ideas that they have yet to master. Student centered pedagogies widely embraced in composition studies align more with a collaborative form of rhetoric than a coercive and domineering approach. The classroom is a space that must be carefully designed to encourage exploration and experimentation. If we can invite students into spaces where they are practicing new skills and striving to improve, then we are more likely to be effective teachers.

The relationship between learning and playing tells us that our students will benefit from the kinds of serious engagement that comes from interactive games. If we can create games or game-like experiences for our students, we will not simply be making our classes fun and engaging, we will be offering the opportunity for our students to test out new ways of thinking. According to James Paul Gee, "Real life works something like a massive multiplayer game--a game like *World of Warcraft*. In such games the player can enact multiple identities…These dynamic processes set up a place or perspective from which to think and interpret" (7). This ability to try to take on a perspective, to see choices and consequences in a meaningful context, is what make video games powerful learning (and teaching) tools. Games challenge us to do more than we thought we wanted to; games challenge us to go deeper into a given situation and explore the possible consequences to our decisions.

Games are naturally invitational and require players to listen, which makes them great places to introduce conversations about social action and inclusion. This aligns with the concept of gaming, in which the player assumes an identity (normally unlike their own) and plays out a specific situation. With invitational rhetoric, unlike traditional rhetoric, the main focus is on creating a deeper understanding, rather than forcing a specific change (Foss and Griffin 6). Similarly, gameplay, particularly gameplay within educational contexts, invites the player to explore a world, situation, or context, leading to meaning-making within that context.In many types of gameplay, there are no "wrong" choices, only objectives to accomplish.

When we situate visual rhetoric in the context of a game, it allows the player to explore concepts within different given contexts without the pressure of proving the "right" answer. In this way, it aligns with Foss and Griffin's invitational rhetoric by taking away the, "...feelings of inadequacy...guilt, embarrassment, or angry submission on the part of the audience..." (7). Gameplay allows for multiple diverse voices and "affirming beliefs" (6). In gameplay, the concept of "Offering perspectives" is at the forefront– different situations can be acted out (9). The game does not tell you "Do x, become y," nor is advancement through the game dependent upon "correct" answers, as with a traditional quiz. Rather, gameplay gives you the space to ask, "What if...?" in a variety of situations, in order to explore concepts freely.

Similarly, gameplay creates the proper "External conditions" for invitational rhetoric to take place– simulated environment leads to feelings of safety; player feedback leads to audience value; player choice situates freedom (10-12). In discussion based classroom activities, students may feel reluctant to speak up for a number of reasons. They may feel that their opinion is unpopular, and that they will be judged for offering it. They may not know how to ask a question, and feel that their ignorance will be held against them.

When we give students a simulated environment with multiple situations and perspectives, they may feel safer to explore different ideas. It gives them distance through the use of a character or avatar, but still holds them accountable for their ideas by asking them to reflect on their choices. By giving the players points in the game where they can respond to both other players and the game's creators, value is achieved

in the players knowing that their perspectives are valued and needed for the game to function to its fullest potential. Narrative-based games are based on the concept of choice, so freedom is at the core of the activity. But beyond the choices that progress the game, there is also the overall choice of which perspectives to explore.

Moving Forward

Ultimately, we are asking teachers to consider not only the content that we expose our students to, but also the ways in which we invite them to experience the content. By situating conversations of rhetoric and socially aware content, our game pushes student thinking in ways that go beyond discussing a text or image in class. An activity like the one we have developed has tremendous potential; however, producing interactive web-documents presents significant challenges.

Being able to create and update activities like ours requires some understanding of web development, which means an additional set of demands on the time of teachers. For those of us who have not been trained in web development, producing an engaging narrative that takes full advantage of web technologies may be daunting. However, we would like to explore the possibility of such activities being supported at the departmental level. Faculty members are well placed to create activities that reflect the student body and climate of our own universities, and collaboration may produce much more insightful activities.

Web-based activities can be time consuming to create, at first, but instructional materials are re-usable, adaptable, and may even improve with time. Student responses on the discussion forums in our game, for example, will remain for other students to see

in other classes and in future semesters. We have a system like this at Iowa State called DRAW. As students respond to the game, the features and content can be improved to improve the interaction and deepen the story lines. If initiative is taken at the department level to support and sustain teacher made, web-based activities, the initial investment will continue to benefit teachers and students for years.

An additional consideration that would have to be explored is the social media element within the game. The message board feature adds a dynamic avenue of engagement to the game, but online interaction also brings the complications of social media. Online communication is often appropriated in an effort to derail or misrepresent the conversations taking place. Authors McVey and Woods provide a concrete example in their article on activism and hashtags. Specifically, they talk about how #HandsUpDontShoot was appropriated by "right-wing, racist online publics" (6) and turned into #PantsUpDontLoot — effectively shifting the conversation from police brutality to matters of dress and protester conduct.

Even though conversations can be redirected through clever responses and can be seen across social media, appropriation within a controlled educational space is potentially manageable. Students could use the message board to hijack the conversations like seen in the McVey and Woods example - not simply presenting an alternative opinion, but rather using the message board for attacks or unproductive arguments. However, the danger could be mitigated by teaching students questioning techniques (allowing them to ask rather than argue), instructor presence on the forum,

or student-teacher reflective responses to the game. Ultimately, we believe the challenges of interactive instructional materials are worth overcoming.

The dangers of separating content and skills are worth considering. In response to E. D. Hirsch's claims about the purpose of literacy, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg highlight the futility in attempting to "make a *theory* of inherent linguistic ideology an appropriate goal" (1201). Their rejection of Hirsch's project reminds us that communication cannot be separated from the cultures and values in which it is produced, spread, and discussed. As we attempt to teach visual communication we should continue to maintain the relationship between communication and meaningful discourse. Bringing in posters and stories that highlight social movements is one of the ways that we will ensure that do our part to fight agains "a process of closing off human possibilities in accordance with the standards of a privileged ideology" (Bizzell and Herzberg 1201).

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