

Exercises in Complexity

- Teaching Statement -

On the first day of class, I ask my students to define the act of composing and to discuss how and where it emerges. Most of my students take this question as a personal invitation to describe their own struggles with writing. Imagining themselves in isolation, some admit that they have never mastered the secrets of good writing. Others claim that they write best when given topics of personal interest. The majority tend to agree that composition is complex, challenging, and oftentimes frustrating. Despite these difficulties, every day my students engage with words, images, sounds, and other symbolic objects: they send emails or post Facebook updates, read blogs and share impressions with friends, view and comment on each other's images, write essays for classes or work in teams – they move seamlessly across multiple channels of communication and in different cultural situations. To bridge the gap between students' perception of writing and their own practices, as a teacher I have one major goal: to help my students embrace complexity in every act of composing.

Complexity: a way of being in the world

In the most mundane acts of writing often lie rich rhetorical contexts and unexpected cultural assumptions. This is one of the most important lessons that my students explore early on in the semester. For instance, in an introductory writing course, my students traced the circulation patterns of images representing Mexican immigrants in the U.S. via Google. When they searched for images by the tag "Mexican immigrants in the US," the search engine retrieved a series of maps on the fluctuations of the Mexican population, along with photographs that portrayed this group as "criminals" and "trespassers." The observations led my students to discuss the intricate ways in which digital platforms (e.g., the search engine) reveal, circulate, and produce problematic ethical and cultural assumptions. In other words, the simple act of searching for an image is a way of discovering the world and engaging with it; it is an act of responsibility, as well as an act of composing our relations with others.

Class: Elementary Composition
Task: Students learned how to analyze and produce images with specific visual tools and media.

Complexity: breaking down to build up

Students are daunted at first by the idea that complexity is not a choice, but an inherent trait of how we produce texts. Their attitudes change, though, when they realize that complexity can be broken down by exploring new habits of mind, methods, and tools that can support their rhetorical choices. For example, to learn about different moves of argumentation, some of my students decided to revise the rhetorical approach of the American Red Cross (ARC). As a group, they researched and analyzed the pamphlets, flyers, website, and Facebook profile of the organization. After this in-depth analysis, the group revised materials that they produced as alternative means of addressing the ARC's audience: a new strategy of maintaining an effective Facebook profile, a different visual rhetoric that emphasized a sense of civic emergency, and changes in language choices. For this project, my students used <emma>, an online writing environment and course management system that

Class: Argumentative Writing
Project: Students developed multimodal projects to revise the rhetoric of a local organization that supports a social cause.

allowed them to build work collaboratively and peer review each other's contributions. At the end of the unit, students were not only able to understand the complex rhetorical situation around ARC, but they also put together a portfolio of artifacts that represented ARC's mission in multiple forms.

Complexity: the power of details

The success of these projects depends on students' ability to move from one genre, mode, or media to another. More importantly, to grasp the complexity of writing, students also need to be able to ask critical questions about the texts that they study. Whether I work with basic, first-year or advanced writers, I encourage them to develop thoughtful inquiry questions, to practice being curious about *why* and *how* other people decide to convey meaning in different ways. In a topic-based composition course, one student prepared the following question in response to bell hooks' article "Eating the Other": "Throughout the reading, hooks constantly refers to "the Others" when speaking about different races; why does she capitalize the "O" in Others?" (303) In this case, the student noticed that the word had a more complex meaning than its common use.

Although the student did not have a clear answer to the question, he genuinely wanted to know how his colleagues interpreted hooks' rhetorical choice. I invite students to foster this kind of attention to details because the power of their artifacts comes with this level of intense and reflective inquiry.

Class: Writing Course on Body Representations and the Beauty Myth
Task: Students prepared a handout with critical questions about the reading.

Complexity: a personal profile

Just as my students learn how to engage with complexity in their writing, I try to cultivate similar habits in my own development as teacher and administrator. At Indiana University, I worked with Professor Tarez Graban, former coordinator of the multilingual course, to develop a sequence-based curriculum that focused on developing textual identities across different discourses. I also served as Assistant Director for Elementary Composition. Under the guidance of Professor Dana Anderson, Director of Composition at Indiana University, together with two other Assistant Directors, I introduced twenty new instructors to the first-year writing curriculum during a weeklong orientation workshop. I mentored first-time instructors during weekly consultations and individual meetings. On these occasions, we exchanged successes and challenges from the classroom, and we put together evaluation practices and lesson plans that help students become better critical readers and writers. Working with new instructors has been instrumental for my own development as teacher and WPA. I have enriched my own pedagogy with new teaching strategies, and I have identified ways of adapting a standard curriculum to a diverse group of teachers who bring to the program different levels of expertise and scholarly interests (e.g., creative writing, literature, rhetoric and composition).

In the context of a changing university, our students are encouraged to engage with complex problems, issues of sustainability and global impact. Therefore, learning how to deal with complexity from a rhetorical perspective is both a challenging and rewarding experience. As I open myself to new opportunities for teaching and mentoring, I continue to enrich my pedagogy in order to better prepare my students as writers, teachers, and scholars in a world of their own making.