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Teaching Statement

We live in a world where we're bombarded by information. Take a look at a typical TV news screen: in addition to a talking head, we are asked to assimilate information from weather and time inserts, sporting results, stock prices and scrolling news completely unrelated to the main story. If we're lucky, there will be an inset talking head too, in conversation with the announcer. And if that's not enough, we can always play with the "picture-in-picture" button on the remote control. Anyone would think that we would be tired out. And yet we're information junkies: as soon as we've finished with the news, we go out and ask for more: we Google our instructors, hit the "random" link in Wikipedia, and take martini-mixing classes. We invite information to come to us, in as many different forms as we can.

Teaching is no exception. Since my very first class in 1996 as a graduate student, my teaching career has spanned the genres: introductory composition, visual literacy, science fiction, media and communication theory, web authoring, interface design, and electronic literature. I have taught in workshops, classrooms, computer labs and online; I have worked in electronic interfaces from MUDs and MOOs through blogs and wikis to content management systems and online courseware. I have taught freshmen and seniors, returning students and GIs; I have taught classes in literature, writing, visual design and computer code. This list has forced me to think very hard about what it means to have to assimilate so much information: both as an instructor and as a student.

Teaching is a matter of genre.

Since becoming a fully-fledged academic, I have had the opportunity to teach in two interdisciplinary programs that cover cultural studies, digital rhetorics, multimodal composition, visual design and code. I have taught theoretical classes in the cultures of new media and the analysis of nontraditional texts, and classes in usability and interface design, beginner and advanced web development, and multimedia authoring. This multi-disciplinary focus has given me a chance to experiment with combinations of course materials that might not normally come together in a humanities setting. This was a difficult adjustment to make, but it allowed me to really think about what I most believed was important in interdisciplinary teaching: delivering and receiving more than one genre of information. In the process, I've discovered that what I most enjoy doing is brining together different genres in the extended sense: not just genres of writing, but also genres of visual, physical and electronic expression.

An early class I designed was an exercise in cross-genre study. In a class called Usability and Interface Design, I had to decide how I was going to convey design principles to a diverse group of students: information systems majors, art students, and English majors. I decided to structure the class around different genres of design: material product design, print-based design, web design, and finally interface design. Thus my first assignment asked students to evaluate an object such as a can opener or stapler, my second to evaluate a print document such as a map or newspaper, my third to evaluate a website and produce an analysis in poster format, and my fourth to analyze an electronic interface such as a cellphone screen, interactive telephone system or TiVo interface. All these exercises allowed students to make connections between industrial, print and visual design, in ways that they could then apply to electronic interfaces: navigation menus, interactive games, and educational media. In short, it was an exercise in technological genre studies.

In my more recent classes, I've worked to expand from the flat screen to the 3-d object, inspired both by my colleague Jody Shipka's foundational text *Toward a Composition Made Whole* and the

maker movement in digital humanities. In my once-a-year senior seminar entitled Visual Literacy, I've been offering a four part assignment in which students must reinterpret or encode a sonnet into various formats - everything from small dioramas to Fluxus boxes and, most recently, a twitter feed you can follow at @shakespeareonefour. This expansion is based on my understanding that any one text is only one particular instantiation of a text that exists in a myriad of possible forms. This is an assignment of which I'm particularly proud and one that has also profoundly influenced my own creative and editorial work.

Students need to know their craft.

At the heart of digital technologies lies code. I encourage students to master and move beyond reliance on commercial tools and learn the code that is their foundation of their profession. While high-end tools such as Adobe Dreamweaver or content management systems such as Wordpress are industry-standard, I believe that students should also "know the craft," that is, understand how computer code works so that they can accurately diagnose problems. Once students know how to work "under the hood," they can move easily from one set of tools to another, thereby protecting themselves from information obsolescence – the reliance on one commercial tool that may be obsolete in two or three years.

Similarly, students need to learn how to make things - or perhaps, more accurately, to relearn. "Information" consists not just of facts but of techniques and alternative modes of expressions - what Edward Tufte calls "dimensions." Our failure to work beyond the flat screen and (sometimes) flatter page represents an unfortunate tendency in higher education to value document over text - and finished product over complex process. An interactive 2- or 3-d timeline that can be rearranged, added to, scrolled and zoomed, can convey the complexities of a moment (made up of many layers) in a way that a written paragraph struggles to achieve.

Students love information. They need to learn how to read it.

The example of television news channels is useful. It's a complex visual rhetoric that needs to be untangled without disengaging the component parts. In other words, it's the interrelation of the parts that is important. All that streaming information is part of a message to us, conveying a sense of our place in the world: we're media creatures located in a world where foreign policy, as well as local events, matters. Art has long had a vocabulary for interpreting screens like this: the movement of the eye from one line to another determines what order information is delivered in; color creates coherence and signposts. It's no longer enough for us to teach argumentation in terms of thesis, evidence, warrant: we have to take into account placement, movement, and time. Ironically, in this our students may be better than us; visual rhetorics have come a long way in the last 20 years.

Information needs to be rethought, not just repackaged.

My favorite rhetorician, Marshall McLuhan, once said that "in the very Hot Peace since the Second War, it is the highways of the mind that have been found inadequate." He was referring to the fact that in an age of information, we cannot expect that the same methods of delivery that were formerly adequate – classrooms, lectures – make sense in an age when we're having to think about many different forms of communication at once. Cognitively, he was saying, it's time to stop thinking about information as something that is delivered, and start thinking about information as something we travel with and manipulate. Classrooms are geographically bounded spaces, and they're not a good metaphor to bring online. Students have learned how to "interpret" the spaces of the classroom and the lab, and now they are learning to interpret the layout of online learning environments on the screen, using the tools visual fluency gives them.

Teachers are the most interactive media around.

Finally, all of us remember the teachers who most influenced us, but most often we treat that remembrance as something to save for essay questions and... well... statements of teaching philosophy. We tend to forget how interesting we are to students, both as teachers and people. And we're unbelievably interactive: we stand in front of the class, walk around behind, kneel down at a lab monitor, draw up quick diagrams, ask questions to which we expect answers. We keep office hours and lab time for one-on-one interaction. We debug code and scan sentences on demand. We wear idiosyncratic clothing, dye our hair, get excited about our research, and sometimes make jokes (usually bad ones). We're not just talking heads; we are streaming media.