teaching statement | melanie yergeau

I was the last person my parents thought would become a teacher. In the days before autism was a household word, my teachers noticed that I didn't communicate like other children they'd encountered. Given my frequent childhood silences, most adults in my life were certain that, best-case scenario, I'd be a basement librarian with several cats.

Now a teacher, I work with a diverse array of students, each with their own unique ways of knowing and communicating. A turning point for me, as both student and teacher, was my introduction to disability studies, and with it the idea that autism might be, at least in part, a social construction. I came to recognize autism as an inextricable part of myself, as a communication difference to be valued rather than eradicated. And the ways in which disability studies has affected my positions as a composition teacher and a writing program administrator are innumerable. I routinely ask: In what ways can I create a more accessible, welcoming learning environment, one that values and encourages multiple modes and methods of expression rather suppresses them? Additionally, I continue to rework and reconsider my approach—that is, my own conceptions of accessibility and what it means to compose—based on student and peer feedback.

Whether teaching composition, professional writing, digital composing, or disability studies, I work toward developing accessible pedagogy in which multimodality and digital work is integral, in which multiple modes of expression are both valued and interrogated. In order to foreground accessibility as a critical concept, I encourage students to: 1) consider the varying abilities of their audiences, 2) advocate for, and take responsibility for, their own diverse ways of writing and learning, and 3) position themselves as researchers and meaning makers within the academy. I believe that students can empower themselves as rhetorically effective writers, designers, and researchers if they take on this critical work.

• • • *Encouraging students to consider the varying abilities of their audiences*

Regardless of the course I'm teaching, I encourage students to examine the needs of their audience in critical ways, to account for the diverse readers, viewers, and/or listeners that encounter their texts. I work to create a class environment in which students feel comfortable directing analytical discussions about audience and accessibility. When I first started teaching first-year writing, I'd passionately drone on about how important digital media was in a writing class, about how important technology was for audiences with diverse needs. Much to my chagrin, at the term's end, I received several evaluations in which students claimed they didn't see the point of digital media in a writing class. As a result, I sought feedback from fellow graduate teaching associates. Through these discussions, I realized that I was doing too much of the discussing and positioning; I wasn't letting my students *discover* the rhetorical affordances of new media on their own. And it was these discussions on student involvement that most contributed to my work as a WPA for First-Year Writing at Ohio State. During my time as a WPA, I co-developed and co-piloted a blogging assignment used by 14 first-year graduate student teachers in our program. Twice each quarter, I met with these instructors and discussed how blogging was working (or not working) in their classes. Each of the instructors remarked that blogging enabled their students to consider critically, and to *discover*, how their use of media affected their audiences.

My conversations with fellow instructors about audience, media, and discovery have profoundly altered my own teaching style, which is now a far cry from my earlier forays into teaching writing. A typical day in my class involves students guiding discussions, involves students contemplating how certain media can better reach (or not) target audiences. I often facilitate such discussions by breaking students into small groups, providing them with a short series of questions, and then reconvening the class for larger discussion. For example, I invite my students to tell *me* the affordances of certain media or genres (e.g., video documentaries), as well as how certain media or genres work to include or exclude readers (e.g., videos with/out captions). Furthermore, I support student learning by having students create their own blogs and maintain an active blogging presence. In some of my classes, for instance, I ask students to complete a blog carnival assignment, which involves synthesizing a dozen blog posts by outside authors on a particular topic. Students have crafted carnivals on topics such as self-advocacy and physical therapy—and in their course evaluations, many have claimed that this project made them feel like they were part of, and composing for, a real community with real needs. And

perhaps most importantly, in their reflection papers, students have commented that working with new media helps them to feel more valued, as audience members, when encountering their peers' texts.

• • • *Accommodating students' own diverse ways of writing and learning*

In striving to design pedagogy that is as inclusive and accessible as possible, I encourage students to take responsibility for, and to advocate for, their own best ways of learning. I believe that being a student does not have to be a passive position. In all of my classes, I strive to know students as individual writers and learners. I work toward this goal by asking students to compose short reflective essays about their own goals and learning styles (usually on their blogs) and by speaking with them individually. When students work in small groups in class, I make it a point to sit with one or two groups and ask them what they hope to get out of a particular session or assignment. Moreover, in my writing and digital media courses, I hold one-on-one conferences with students, during which we talk about how they best write and learn. Also important, I think, are the ways in which I consciously model this sort of advocacy during class. On the first day, I tell students that I have an auditory processing delay and that I frequently write on the board, or type on my laptop, so that I can be more responsive to their needs. Students have, in turn, responded with their own suggestions for making the class more accessible, asking, for instance, that I photograph whiteboard notes and post the images online after class. I've since picked up the habit of photographing whiteboards, and in their evaluations and in class discussions, students have identified this practice as a helpful one.

In order to engage multiple learning styles and be responsive to student feedback, I integrate a variety of technologies and media in class reading/viewing/listening content, as well as in class activities and projects. In my digital documentary course, for example, I ask students to research key terms in visual rhetoric, to demonstrate these concepts in their own photography, and to share their work with their classmates both through their blogs and during class discussion. In doing this activity, students engage multiple modes and methods of composing and making meaning, and they take responsibility not only for their own ways of learning but for teaching their peers as well.

• • • *Positioning students as researchers*

When I first started teaching composition, the director of the First-Year Writing Program said something that struck me: "Your students are researchers." Considering oneself a writer and researcher is often a new task for students, a position they do not consider because common preconceptions of education involve student passivity. My goal is to move students beyond the position of "receptacle" and toward the position of "meaning maker." To accomplish this, I design course materials and activities that actively involve students in the direction, shape, and scope of the class. In my disability studies and composition courses, I ask students to engage in hands-on learning tasks that involve both research and presentation components. For example, I ask students to use Flip video cameras and document architectural inaccessibility, draft a report, and then submit their work to me, the student newspaper, or the ADA Office. Such an activity not only involves familiarization, on their part, with the genres of video documentary and formal letter writing, but likewise involves contributing to scholarly discussions on what in/accessibility itself is and how it is represented in the physical environment. This activity is one that students routinely highlight in their class evaluations.

Additionally, I encourage students to position themselves as researchers by partnering them with community organizations. In my autism and rhetoric course, students collaboratively develop video public service announcements for and with the Central Ohio Autism Society. As a class, we invite members from the autism community to our class meeting for a panel discussion, and students take responsibility not only for guiding the discussion with their own questions and topic ideas, but also in documenting (via video, audio, text, and image) the discussion for use in their PSAs. With community-based learning, I've found, students pay serious rhetorical attention to their work and recognize the ways in which their projects have direct effects on the world beyond the university—making access/ibility more than just a classroom tool or topic.

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One of my most valuable experiences as a composition instructor has been re/seeing myself as a student through the lenses of both digital media studies and disability studies. This humbles me, allows me to be more reflexive, helps me to listen rhetorically and regard my students as co-participants in the larger project of making meaning, of making composition studies a more accessible place.