Prompt 4.2 (Fall 2020)

Articles

Editor's Note

Susanne Hall*

10/1/2020

I am delighted to share issue 4.2 of *Prompt* with readers. I expect that a wide variety of teachers of college writing will be inspired by the first three assignments presented in this issue, each of which observes a challenge of teaching writing and proposes an innovative writing assignment that cleverly addresses those challenges. Our final assignment will be of interest to both instructors in museum studies as well as to those who are more generally interested in engaging students in critical, cultural experiences in their communities.

In "Writing a Videogame: Rhetoric, Revision, and Reflection," instructor Kendall Gerdes and students Melissa Beal and Sean Cain share their experiences with an assignment that teaches rhetoric and the writing process in an exciting way–by having students design a text-based videogame. Gerdes developed this assignment, and Beal and Cain contribute reflections on their experiences composing the games in Gerdes's course. The course ends with an in-class arcade where students play one another's games–a fun payoff for an assignment with serious outcomes.

Lance Langdon and Jens Lloyd leave the virtual world behind and head outdoors in "Walk Local, Argue Local: A Campus-Based Prompt for a Basic Writing Course." Drawing on published writing about the campus of the University of California, Irvine, this assignment allows students to make arguments by drawing on evidence from their personal experiences with the campus architecture and green space. The authors suggest this assignment, which includes a group exploration of the campus, opens up a particularly productive entry-point to academic writing for college writers who might otherwise have some trepidation about making arguments that challenge those made by experienced, published writers.

In "Assessing, Deliberating, Responding: An Annotated Bibliography for a Post-Truth Age," Jacob Richter reimagines the oft-assigned annotated bibliography for our complexly mediated moment. Richter explains his interest in revising the annotated bibliography so it becomes an occasion to explore and reflect critically upon students' "lived information cultures." In addition to reviewing scholarly writing on a topic of interest, students must

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also annotate forms of communication that are common in our lives but are less so in writing classrooms. Some of their selections include Twitch video game streams, bumper stickers, overheard conversations, and graffiti.

Like Langdon and Lloyd, Rachael Zeleny takes her students out of the classroom, but instead of walking around campus, they head for local museums. Most fundamentally, this assignment invites students into museums in their community that many have never visited. Further, it invites them into active dialog with curators and exhibits, encouraging students to think critically about how museums handle issues of diversity, accessibility, and public engagement.

Looking ahead, the next issue of *Prompt* will be part one of a set of two special issues focused on writing assignments related to social justice. Both issues 5.1 and 6.1 will provide a rich array of assignments and reflective essays interested in social justice from diverse perspectives and with different disciplinary contexts.

Writing a Videogame: Rhetoric, Revision, and Reflection

Kendall Gerdes, Melissa Beal, and Sean Cain*

10/1/2020†

Abstract: This essay reflects on a three-part assignment in which students plan, design, and reflect on a text-based videogame. Created originally for a composition course focused on rhetoric and videogames, the assignment lends itself to teaching about the writing process, especially invention and revision, teaching procedural rhetorics, and teaching technical communication concepts such as iterative design and usability. This essay is coauthored by the instructor with two students who took the course in different semesters, highlighting the collaborative nature of even solo-authored game design, as well as how making games can help students take up rhetorical concerns in other genres.

Reflective Description and Course Context

Dr. Kendall Gerdes

At Texas Tech University, ENGL 4360 is an advanced topics course formally called "Studies in Composition." For three semesters, I had a chance to teach this course under the title "Weird Videogames" in the Department of English's Technical Communication program. The course focuses on games that are "weird" in that they push back against a widely held view of videogames as technical challenges, best left to a small group of expert designers and players—instead, the games we play emphasize culture, critique, and collaboration.[1] Yes, students get to play videogames in class, and for homework, and in the final unit of the course, they also design their own playable videogame. The assignment to "write" a text-based videogame is the focus of this essay, including the

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planning document for the game, the game itself, and the reflection students write after they submit their game's final version.

ENGL 4360 usually enrolls juniors and seniors, often (though not always) working on a major or minor in English or a program in the Department of English, such as Technical Communication. Substantial writing is required. Because the course is writing-focused, the readings and writing assignments are organized around the rhetorical issues that videogames raise: What do the rules encourage me to do (or not do)? How does the game get me to identify myself with the player-character? What arguments does the game itself make?[2] This "writing a videogame" assignment could be used in a variety of rhetoric, writing, and technical communication courses to teach concepts including revision, procedural rhetoric, iterative design, and usability.

The first semester I taught Weird Videogames, the class met once a week and had short weekly writing assignments, but in the second and third semesters, departmental scheduling needs changed the class meetings to twice weekly, and I combined some assignments to make longer but less frequent writing assignments. However, I retained the structure of the final unit, a three-part assignment in which students plan, design, and reflect on their own text-based videogame. Before they get to this final project, students in "Weird Videogames" will have written a game review, followed by a rhetorical analysis of a game. They begin the final assignment by writing a Game Prospectus, a short plan that identifies characters, storylines, and design elements that students hope to include. Students then have a week's worth of class time to work on their game with their peers in a "game jam" setting, helping each other solve design problems in an unstructured collaborative environment. After students submit their game (which is turned in as an HTML file), the last component of the assignment is an Author's Statement, in which students reflect on their game design choices and rhetorically analyze the final version of their game.

Throughout the semester, students in the course play assigned videogames each week, sometimes for homework and sometimes in class—or even as a class. Discussions are organized around getting students to think rhetorically about videogames. What audience is this game for? What beliefs does it want that audience to identify with? What rules structure the game, and how do those procedures shape the things that players are supposed to value or pursue? Because students in my courses are evaluated using a portfolio grading method called the Learning Record,[3] they often write about their answers to these questions in weekly journal entries. (Students eventually use the journal as evidence in a final essay assigning themselves a grade for the course.) In designing their own videogames, students draw on the models they have been assigned to play in class, and they are expected to apply the rhetorical principles they have studied to their own game's design. The final reflection allows students the opportunity to make these influences and aims explicit, as well as to analyze any changes in their plans that evolved out of the design work itself. The semester ends with an in-class arcade in which students play each other's games and offer feedback that helps authors compose their final reflections.

One aim I had in crafting this assignment was to get students to see rhetoric as both critical and productive: in addition to writing *about* and commenting *on* games, I also wanted students to experience the rhetorical work of writing a game itself. I also wanted this assignment to demystify the composing process of making games. Imagining that my students for the most part would relate to videogames as consumers (whether highly engaged or alienated, or somewhere in between), I wanted them to take on the role of videogame designers, too. As I argue in the next section, there are plenty of reasons to make games other than commercial success, and I wanted my students to try out the possibilities that writing videogames can afford.

Teaching with Twine: Game Jams and Collaborative Learning

The platform we used to design our videogames is an open-source software program called Twine, first created in 2009 by Chris Klimas; for more on how Twine and Twine games have been used in other types of courses, see Salter (2015); Hergenrader (2016); Thevenin (2017); Milligan (2019); and more at twinery.org/wiki/twine:education. Two documents were especially influential in developing this assignment, and they both fall somewhere between technical documentation and manifesto: they focus both on *how* to use Twine to make games as well as on *why* you might want to make games. Students read the first text, Porpentine's (2012) "Creation Under Capitalism and the Twine Revolution," before their first in-class game jam. "Creation Under Capitalism," which was published as a blogpost to the site *Nightmare Mode* in November 2012, opens with this robust claim about the power of digital games:

> Our global network is composed of human minds uploaded into word form.
>
> On this plane the word is the most potent unit of force.
>
> It costs a couple of keystrokes to control someone else's brain for a second, and longer if you do it right. (para. 1-3)

After reviewing the contentious history of interactive fiction, hypertext, and digital games, Porpentine explains the damage wrought by corporate game studios who make games for exclusive, expensive, and tightly monitored platforms. Corporate games position their audience as consumers, not creators. Because their aim is to sell the most copies, corporate games tend to reproduce the all normative privileges of the world outside of games, with its racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, and transphobic values. Porpentine argues that Twine can help ordinary people connect with their creativity by making hypertext games and sharing them in order to connect with a community. Making games outside of the gatekept corporate games industry can reclaim creativity as a means of resistance to capitalism.

The other text that inspired this assignment is Anna Anthropy's (2015) "Love, Twine, and the End of the World," published as a choose-your-own-adventure-style chapter in *The State of Play: Creators and Critics on Videogame Culture.* Anthropy argues

that making Twine games is akin to doodling on napkins or keeping a journal—she writes that even "people who don't think of themselves as artists" (Section 4) can both casually and meaningfully engage in artistic activity. Reflecting on her own experiences making Twine games, Anthropy explains how composing games can help people navigate challenging life choices, share personal experiences with others, and even heal from past traumas. Anthropy's chapter closes with this direct address to readers, urging us to make games as a way of connecting with others: "You spent a lifetime sending out signals you were scared would be misinterpreted, misunderstood, garbled, absorbed, allowed to pass unregistered into the cold of space. Now you know. The signal was never lost" (Section 15). Anthropy emphasizes the creative spark ignited by making games collaboratively by working at the same time or responding to a single theme in what is called a game jam.

Having students make videogames in a classroom game jam enables them to learn Twine's procedures quickly, sharing pointers and solving problems together as they write. "Game jam" is an industry term for creating a videogame in a limited, usually short, amount of time. The idea is to bring an idea to completion quickly; once a game exists, it can always be improved or remade later. Game jams are typically done with a team or in the presence of peers. The collaborative environment encourages students to research as a group and to share insights and information; students can solve problems much more quickly in a game jam than in an isolated study space. Students can submit their games as HTML files simply by attaching the file to an email, or uploading it to a shared folder, but they can also publish their Twine games online through the free Twine hosting site *philome.la*.[4] For more about the features of Twine that make it well-suited for creating independent and personal games, see Friedhoff (2014); for examples of such games, see Kopas (2015).

Student Reflections: Planning, Writing, and Reflecting on Twine Games

In this section, article coauthors Melissa Beal and Sean Cain, students who both took the Weird Videogames course with me in separate semesters, share their reflections on completing the Writing a Videogame assignment. Melissa and Sean are both graduates of the Department of English programs in Technical Communication and Creative Writing.

The supplementary files for this article include Melissa's and Sean's sample Game Prospectuses and Author's Statements, as well as their sample Twine games, available online at *philome.la/Redpression* and at *philome.la/Secain95*.

Melissa Beal

The prospect of creating a game inspired me, as it is a way to create fiction that people can interact with. I used the Game Prospectus assignment to create a framework that organized my thoughts on the story and helped me pinpoint where applying rhetorical techniques would be most effective.

In my game "War Memories," I specifically focused on how war is cruel, but is something

to be remembered, not forgotten. Rhetorically, my main focus was identification. I wanted players to experience the game as the player-character, experiencing the trauma personally. I wrote my Author's Statement for the purpose of analyzing and discussing the different rhetorical techniques I used to encourage identification. The techniques that I discuss in the Author's Statement include giving players the option to study the protagonist's room and my use of glitched text, which looks like like this. In my Author's Statement, I explain my use of glitched text by saying that the "glitchy words are meant to be a visual representation of the protagonist's struggle to remember. Because the player can actually see these struggles instead of just reading about them, it should be easier for them to understand the protagonist's suffering." I also pushed a player's identification with non-player characters (or NPCs) by having them spend time with NPCs and putting them in full control of which NPCs live or die during the course of the game. I end the game with a quote by William Tecumseh Sherman that I felt summed up my message: "War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it." This quote was added in to communicate my message to players one last time.

While the Author's Statement was an effective way to analyze my own game, the Game Jam was a great way to see to see other students' techniques and creations. I find that the Game Jam was especially interesting in the context of a hybrid course;[5] by sharing our games online, all students were given the chance to connect with and learn from others. It was possible to sit next to the creator of a game you were playing, but you might also play games made by a classmate across the state or country. On top of the excitement of interactivity, I was able to receive feedback from other students on bugs in my game or extra things that I could add. Giving and receiving feedback on games taught me how to create a better player experience and how to communicate my ideas well.

This course was the second course that I took on rhetoric; I took the first during the same semester, and it was more traditional: students were given readings that explained how rhetorical tools were used in speech and writing. As the semester progressed, we analyzed a handful of speeches and writings. While that class was beneficial, I felt that studying rhetoric in videogames helped me understand the topic better. Similar to the first class, I was given ample examples of how rhetorical devices were used and to what end. However, there was no overt vocabulary study as there was in the other class. Instead, students were encouraged to understand rhetoric through real world examples by interacting with videogames as much as possible. The opportunity to apply those devices on our own only further cemented the rhetorical ideas that were taught in class, as not only did we study them and understand them, we were also invited to use them. In my own experience, being able to apply and not just observe rhetorical techniques has been more helpful, especially in the long term, than more traditional study.

Sean Cain

Since starting college, I had an interest in writing horror. I entered the class with an idea I had trouble finding a form for: a story in which someone possesses a device called

the "reality check" that allows them to momentarily see "true reality." As it turns out, "true reality" is filled with horrifying, previously invisible, monsters. I wanted to express this existential fear that monsters might be roaming about in places we consider safe or mundane. When we got to the Twine game portion of the class, I realized a Twine game was the perfect medium for this story. The monster is one that bends reality itself, so the player has to think outside the box when interacting with it. The mechanic of reader choice allowed my story to go in a special direction.

In my game, "The Black Pages," the player is experiencing financial trouble. They happen upon a website called The Black Pages, a site where people can list jobs for paranormal investigations. The player encounters a high-paying job: to investigate a supposedly haunted and abandoned apartment complex. Thinking it will be easy money, the player accepts, and purchases the "reality check" required for the job. Once the player gets to their destination and uses the reality check, it reveals a monster dubbed "the Seer." A tall and scrawny pale humanoid with no features save for thousands of tiny black dots covering its body which, upon further inspection, are tiny eyes looking in every direction. This creature has the ability to alter perception to such an extent that it changes reality (at least on an individual basis).

From there, the game allows players to choose between specific philosophies regarding the best way to deal with this monster. If the player feels the Seer is pure evil and should not be a part of this world, they have the option to kill it, but they sacrifice the ability to capture evidence of it and therefore lose out on getting paid for the job. If the player prefers to be an observer, or is more concerned with completing the job, they can simply capture evidence of the Seer and then make their escape leaving the monster alive but completing the job. Then, once they have the evidence, they can choose to hand it over to the person who employed them, receiving payment, or they can reveal the evidence to the world causing a revolution in the understanding of reality. However, the player is assassinated at the end of that path. My intention with each path was to capture each ethical conclusion a player might reasonably draw about such a creature. What *should* someone do if they encounter such a creature? What should someone do with the proof of its existence?

Expressing this idea with multiple paths was a fortunate blessing; had I written this story as a standard narrative with one ending, I do not think it would have reached its full potential. The restraints of one path within one story can sometimes feel paralyzing; the creative freedom of this project and the branching playstyle of Twine allowed me to make it into something new and unique. It also makes Twine projects more exhaustive and more time consuming than linear fiction writing, which is why the Game Prospectus aided my development of the project. The goal of the Game Prospectus assignment was to define the meaning/message of my game as well as how I planned to accomplish that message. Writing fiction is often an intuitive process, and the Game Prospectus took some of the intuition out of the equation. This helped me see fiction as more of a rhetorical process: I have an end argument I want to achieve, but how do I get there? This was different than my usual approach, and while I do not think this approach is

necessary to creative writing, I do think it was a useful one.

The lesson rounded out with an Author's Statement that provided a satisfying end to the project; it gave me a space to explain my reasoning behind certain choices and sacrifices. The Author's Statement was similar to the Game Prospectus but more reflective than prospective. It was an introspective look back on the choices I made, how the final product differed from my vision, and the changes I made in revision. My original plan was far more ambitious than what was actually made, which I think is common for creative projects, but being able to rationalize and justify whatever shortcomings my final project encountered gave me a sense of accomplishment and a potential path to realize my original vision with more time.

Conclusion

Dr. Kendall Gerdes

As my coauthors demonstrate above, students learned a great deal about writing in multiple genres from the Writing a Videogame sequence. A central argument this article aims to advance is that making videogames *is* a writing activity. Many of the composing processes that we want our students to learn can be practiced by making videogames. As the instructor, I think one of the biggest successes of this assignment happens when students can realize their own creative freedom, like Melissa and Sean did. And as their instructor, I also get to observe how students connect the processes of planning, writing, revising, and reflecting to the rhetorical concerns and objectives. Students strategize and learn techniques from each other about how best to realize their goals. They think constantly about their audience—their games' players—and whether they successfully communicated what they set out to communicate. They think of more ideas than they could possibly write in the final weeks of the course, so they learn to bring their projects to a close to meet a deadline, thinking about the possible future iterations of games they might keep working on.

Instructors may read this essay and still fear that making videogames is too complicated a task for them to lead their students in. It is true that the intimidation students might feel when they learn they will make their own videogames can be intense. But Twine's simplicity and accessibility mean that students and instructors alike can learn it quickly and do not need any specialized knowledge of computer code to write their own videogames. I encourage instructors to consider how their own course goals might be served by having students complete this assignment sequence in full or even just in part: taking just one class period to have students make playable games with Twine can help them think about the choices they make as writers and the effect of those choices on their readers—and the endless horizon of possibilities that they, as writers, could choose to explore.

Assignment: Game Design Prospectus and Author's Reflection

(To view a PDF facsimile of the original formatting of this assignment, return to this article's homepage and locate the link to the "Assignment" PDF.)

Spring 2018

Game Prospectus Assignment (4/18/2018)

In your journals, write a game prospectus–a proposal for the Twine game you'll submit as a final project.

Think about the argument you want your game to make. How can you design procedures to reflect that? To enable/constrain your players? Also consider:

- Who are the characters in your game? How much can players customize them?
- What's the storyline like? Are there branches? Multiple endings?
- Think about the kinds of links players will interact with: what words or phrases do players click on? Are they highly descriptive, or are their effects hidden at first?
- What will design elements contribute to your game? Are fonts, text colors, and background colors important? Will you incorporate images? Sounds?

You'll have next week in class to work on your Twine game, and we'll have a Twine Arcade on April 30, so think about scope: what will you actually be able to accomplish/finish in that amount of time?

Author's Statement Assignment (4/30/2018)

Your Twine game is the last major project in our course before the LR Final. When you write about your game on the LR Final, you'll have three other components to draw on:

- Your game prospectus
- Your author's statement
- A review of your game from a peer

For your author's statement, think about an artist's statement that might accompany a piece in a museum. You can use your prospectus as a draft if you like, but in any case you should revisit it and discuss how you realized (or changed) your plans along the way. Consider also:

- What did you hope to argue?
- What audience did you hope to reach?
- What beliefs or emotions does your game appeal to?

- What do the procedures of your game make possible (or impossible)?

You may also discuss how characters, storyline(s), ending(s), and design decisions you created shape your game. Submit your author's statement on Dropbox before class on Wednesday, 5/2!

Fall 2017

- **Game Prospectus.** Propose your own videogame! This short should outline your plans for a game you will make in Twine. Who are your characters? What is your storyline? How will your game end?
- **Author's Statement.** This short will accompany your Twine game (think artist's statement, like might accompany a piece in a museum). What did you hope to argue? What beliefs or ideologic did you appeal to? How did you aim to garner assent from players? What does your game demonstrate about rhetorical identification?

Notes

[1]The course title was intended to signal to students that we would be covering mostly non-mainstream videogames, where "weird" functions a bit euphemistically to name games that dealt with a range of potentially controversial topics, including queer relationships, mental health, immigration enforcement, gun violence, and childhood trauma.

[2]These questions have been taken up by scholars in games studies as well as rhetoric, writing studies, and technical communication. For more on procedural rhetoric, see Bogost (2007); King (2010); Ruberg (2015); Holmes (2017); on videogames and identification, see Shaw (2012); Warren (2013); and on the inventiveness of indie games, see Keogh (2019).

[3]The Learning Record method of assessment was adapted to higher education by M.A. Syverson; for more info, see learningrecord.org.

[4]Philome.la closed to new submissions at the end of September 2019.

[5]"Hybrid" here refers to a course that enrolls both onsite and online students, and the whole class meets synchronously with some students in the classroom and some using videoconference software.

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Walk Local, Argue Local: A Campus-Based Prompt for a Basic Writing Course

Lance Langdon and Jens Lloyd*

10/1/2020†

Abstract: This assignment deploys place-based pedagogy in a basic writing course, and enacts it through first-person research in the form of a walking tour of a university campus. Students first read and discuss two texts about their campus: an article analyzing campus architecture and a philosophical treatise about the campus park. Students then marshal evidence gathered through a walking tour to argue with one of these texts. In addition to bolstering students' confidence for contesting claims advanced by authorities, this assignment encourages students and teachers alike to cultivate a more deliberate awareness of their surroundings. Because this assignment is meant to be grounded in a specific locale, instructors adapting this prompt are encouraged to seek out texts addressing their own institutional settings.

Aldrich Park, a circular greenspace at the heart of the University of California, Irvine (UCI) campus, is riddled with desire lines. Crisscrossing the preordained geometry of the walkways delineated by campus planners, these desire lines indicate paths that campus inhabitants have made for themselves. Some track through the center of the park, while others skirt the edges. Some are well trod and well defined, while others are nascent and barely discernible. All mark attempts by inhabitants to push back against the design of Aldrich Park, to push back against the planners who composed the space. In this way, these desire lines are manifestations of individuals grappling with and responding to authority.

This process of grappling with and responding to authority is one that students face regularly in our writing classrooms. We tell students we want their opinions and value their perspectives on a topic, and, to stimulate their thinking and provoke discussion, we furnish them the best that professional writers and academics have written on the subject.

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But, just like inhabitants facing the preordained geometry of a campus park, students can be reluctant to step off the demarcated paths. They can be reluctant to challenge the authority of assigned texts, an authority endorsed not just by the publishers who have deemed these texts worthy of circulating but by us, the instructors, who lend these ideas our silent endorsement just by distributing them to students. Moreover, students can be chastened by the intellect displayed in the readings, not to mention the stylishness of the prose, and this is often especially true for students in basic writing courses.

How is a student to summon the confidence to develop their own ideas in this situation, not to mention gather the evidence needed to present those ideas persuasively? How is a student to summon the confidence to forge their own desire line? In this article, offering place-based, first-person investigation as a method for helping basic writers chart their own desire lines in academic discourse, we share a prompt that asks students to use their experiences *of* the campus to engage with assigned texts that advance arguments *about* the campus.

In inviting writing instructors to locate their pedagogy in meaningful ways on the campuses they and their students inhabit, we find common cause with place-based pedagogy, which emerges from the conviction, articulated best by David A. Gruenewald (2014), that "[p]laces, and our relationships to them, are worthy of our attention because places are powerfully pedagogical" (p. 143). Though the pedagogy originated in K-12 contexts, the last two decades have witnessed what Nedra Reynolds (2007) deems "a decided shift towards place-based pedagogies" in rhetoric/composition, as trends such as service learning and ecocomposition have inspired teachers to "connect writing students with their environments" (p. 260). Place-based assignments bring into focus and make a part of the pedagogical endeavor a variety of human and non-human elements. Such assignments, according to Nathan Shepley (2014), are most effective when they "help student writers integrate their ideas more fully into the constructed, multifaceted environments around them" (Deciding What to Value section, para. 6). Though these assignments often prompt students to "connect" with places beyond the campus, there is a subset that encourages students to "integrate their ideas [and, by extension, themselves] more fully into the constructed, multifaceted" geography of the campus. Our desire to name and define *campus-based pedagogy* as a subset of place-based pedagogy is not meant to affirm the flawed notion that campuses are set apart from the rest of the world. We acknowledge that campuses are vitally enmeshed with their local and regional environs. Yet we maintain that campuses are also distinct social and material sites that deserve a dedicated set of pedagogical practices.

Campuses vary in shape, size, purpose, and population; therefore, campus-based pedagogy is marked by heterogeneity. Nonetheless, in surveying some of the literature (Blakely & Pagnac, 2012; Feinberg, 2004; Hunter, 2011; Krug, 2015), we note that these pedagogical endeavors are united by an interest in encouraging students to perceive the institutional terrain as the grounds for robust intellectual and rhetorical engagement. For new students

in particular, a campus-based curriculum can correspond to the process of deliberately inhabiting or becoming familiar with new surroundings. We see this on display most especially in the introductory course sequence at Iowa State University (ISU) outlined by Barbara J. Blakely and Susan B. Pagnac (2012) that "operationalizes campus place not as a generic, neutral backdrop that students pass through on their way to a vocation, but as a purposeful and rich assemblage of physical, verbal, and natural artifacts that play an important role in students' adjustment process and in their higher education journey" (p. 13). In one of their major assignments that analyzes the built environment, Blakely and Pagnac note how the assignment moves beyond "description and personal reaction" to include "analytical elements addressing why a building or a piece of art is appropriate and meaningful for [ISU], how it fits into this place's history and contributes to the institution's educational mission, and how it signifies, however subtly and aesthetically, the educational opportunities the campus place offers for students" (p. 28). Ultimately, Blakely and Pagnac's course sequence requires students to become familiar enough with the campus to craft persuasive claims about it.

Beyond helping students acclimate to new surroundings, other assignments that we classify as campus-based pedagogy invite students to critique their campuses by adopting specific methodologies and critical lenses. Explaining her efforts connected with the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI), Gina Hunter (2011) underscores the radical potential of student-generated critique. "Ethnographic inquiry," she argues, "is one way to harness students' unique knowledge of and special position within the university while, at the same time, helping them question the often taken-for-granted aspects of their university experience" (p. 20). Matthew I. Feinberg (2004) turns to critical geography for help in designing a writing assignment that has students analyzing the implicit ideologies that constitute their educational environment. Rather than directing scrutiny beyond the boundaries of the campus, which risks defining academic work broadly and college writing specifically as the products of "disinterested observers" (p. 58), Feinberg hopes that this assignment "rais[es] students' awareness of their relationship with the spaces they inhabit and the ideological components of these settings" (p. 59). Generating awareness takes a less individualized form in an assignment detailed by Aubrey Streit Krug (2015) that has students contemplating the campus through an environmentalist lens. Describing a first-year composition course she taught at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Krug introduces a "perennial pedagogy" that aims to counteract students' transitory experience of the campus by getting them to cultivate "an active and reflective sense of place" (p. 111). For one assignment, using as a model text James J. Farrell's *The Nature of College*, Krug asks students "to identify an issue question about our local educational place" and then to compose "an exploratory argument considering ways different stakeholders might answer that question before coming to their own conclusions" (p. 117).

Our assignment encourages both the *habitation* and *critique* called for in these aforementioned examples of campus-based pedagogy. Specifically, like Krug's assignment, our

prompt asks students to build on and/or contest already-existing arguments about the UCI campus—a large, public, research-intensive university in the southwestern United States. Students write an argumentative essay responding to a published article about UCI. Writers have two options: respond to William Cronon (1996), a philosopher who ruminates on the artificiality of Aldrich Park, or respond to Alan Hess (2014), an architectural critic who takes readers on a tour of campus buildings. This prompt was assigned by Lance in a basic writing course that primarily served two groups: 1) international students transitioning out of an English-learner program and into the first-year writing program, and 2) domestic, multilingual, first-generation college-goers from working-class families. Campus-based pedagogy, we believe, is especially advantageous for these and other cohorts of basic writers who, as a result of their placement in developmental courses, may feel initially out of place or excluded on campus.

Designing the Assignment, Observing the Outcomes

The assignment emerged from our discussions about how to make the most of the campus environment we share with students. At the time, Jens was completing a dissertation that applied the insights of rhetoric/composition's spatial turn to campus life, and Lance was looking for ways to reinvigorate his composition courses. When asked by Lance about campus-specific readings, Jens recommended the pieces by Cronon and Hess. Lance incorporated the walking tour component to enact experiential learning as a stimulus to thinking (Dewey, 1933). The tour shares features with other activities like writing marathons (Martens, 2015) that encourage groups to participate in a common experience and process that experience together through composing and sharing writing. Such activities aim to increase students' interest in the readings by revealing the materiality of the subject matter. Not merely confined to the pages of the assigned readings, the park and campus architecture became interactive elements which students could view from different perspectives and at different times, and within which students could share insights conversationally during the tour.

Transforming aspects of the readings into interactive elements was a key component of Lance's design for this assignment, as he had long noted that many first-year students defer to the authority of assigned texts when forming arguments and struggle to find evidence with which to challenge the claims being made in those texts. Lance hoped that students' sustained, direct observations of the places mentioned by Cronon and Hess would encourage students to consider *themselves* as authorities on those spaces, and that this would in turn help them to form and defend their own arguments about the campus.

The first step for students was to understand the arguments advanced by Cronon and Hess. Accordingly, Lance led class discussions on both readings. Cronon, a professional philosopher, writes not so much for first-year college students as for his philosophical

peers, troubling the distinctions they make between artifice and nature, humanity and the environment. Hess, an architect, is more interested in reaching a lay audience. For example, Hess corrects the common misconception that the buildings making up UCI's historic core are "brutalist" by noting the finer touches of their design. Though Cronon was more difficult, both articles required unpacking. Accordingly, in addition to talking through study questions on the readings, Lance led students in a sentence-by-sentence reading of the heart of Cronon's argument to help them trace the logic of its development, and he provided them with visual examples that helped them to grasp the differences in architectural movements referenced by Hess. The class also read excerpts from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say* to learn frameworks that gave them options for phrasing their responses to Hess's and Cronon's arguments.

Then came time for the campus tour. Lance met students outside the classroom and distributed a multi-page handout. Passages from the two readings appeared on the left of the page, in the order the walking tour would follow (first the building where class was held, then the adjacent library, etc.). Blank space was left on the right for notes students would take as Lance led the tour, pointing out the locations mentioned in the readings and encouraging students to reread the passages as they observed the places firsthand. Lance was fortunate in that the professional authors described adjacent spaces: Hess described buildings making up the historic campus core, and these buildings encircled Aldrich Park, the subject of Cronon's treatise. Lance varied instruction on the architectural portion of the tour, sometimes letting students read and observe quietly, and other times asking students to voice their own perspectives to the whole class or in pairs. The tour concluded in the park, where students sat and reread the Cronon's thoughts, explored the grounds that he deemed artificial and unnatural, and again compared Cronon's observations and conclusions with their own.

The assignment was, for most students, a success. When discussing campus architecture, the most ambitious students conducted independent research, with some even visiting on-campus archives to seek out old photos and original design documents for campus buildings. In response to Hess's metaphorical descriptions, students constructed their own metaphors to characterize campus buildings in support of their interpretations (e.g. a "mushroom-shaped" building for an organic style). When observing nature in Aldrich Park, many made close observations of local flora, turning a microscope, as it were, to patterns in bark, or in the trunks and branches of the trees. Taking up and taking on Cronon's ideas, students decided for themselves whether it mattered that many of the plants in the park were non-native and whether sandblasting out an underground rock formation for surface display rendered it unnatural.

Lance had not anticipated how much students' disciplinary backgrounds would shape their observations and arguments. Responding to Cronon, one biology major discussed the diachronic growth and development of the local flora in the campus park, which in her

view had allowed the space to develop into an established, self-sustaining ecosystem by the time she arrived on campus, though it hadn't yet been when Cronon visited the park in its earlier days. Several other students wrote euphonious descriptions of Aldrich Park's natural beauty, presumably following on pastoral writing traditions. Responding to Hess, many writers addressed buildings in which they spent a good deal of time, often because of their majors (e.g. the engineering building), and they commented with insight as to how the form of the buildings impacted their functionality—from the placement of restrooms to the certain slant of light found in the study carrels on spring afternoons.

Yet even as students brought their individual expertise to what they observed, it mattered that they began this writing together on the tour. While they each had their own copies of the readings and their own blank halves of pages to fill, students revisited these readings and made their observations seated amongst peers in a different configuration than what the usual classroom afforded. As students ventured contrary opinions or unexpected analogies, this configuration seemed to more readily enable productive side-conversations to pop up and flourish. It might also be that there was something liberating to thought in being not just on campus, but outdoors. Lance and his students were away from rigid lines of creaking desks and subject to the traffic of other campus dwellers—insects, professors, picnickers, custodians. As students sat, observed, and wrote, they were lit by the same sun that threw the forms of campus architecture into relief, buffeted by the same wind and moisture that fed the plants in the park.

Acknowledging Limits, Pondering Possibilities

Though the assignment achieved much of what it was designed to do in Lance's basic writing course, it could be extended in a number of different directions, especially if translated to intermediate or advanced writing courses. Students could respond to multiple sources rather than just one, juggling and synthesizing a number of viewpoints about their campus. More ambitiously, the class could generate their *own* texts about campus spaces by soliciting the perspectives of campus staff. In a previous version of this course, custodial workers on campus had graciously taken the time to be interviewed by Lance's students, a project inspired by Proyecto Carrito (Marko, Osorio, Sepenoski, & Catalani, 2015). One could do the same here, asking staff to document how they use the space, and thereby bringing to light arguments about the campus that may be ignored by, or invisible to, students and faculty. The dialogues program at the University of Colorado, Boulder (2019) has modeled how such conversations can be facilitated, and Paula Mathieu (2005) suggests procedures for honoring and reimbursing the time that community members commit to such conversations.

We also recognize that this assignment might seem to exclude those with different mobilities or health concerns. Appreciating this fact, we think it is essential to account for such differences by, for instance, ensuring the accessibility of all stops on the tour or spending

considerable time at a single accessible spot. Most pointedly, we think that, in the interest of avoiding exclusionary language, future iterations of the assignment would benefit from using the term "wandering" instead of "walking." One upside of the term is how similar it is to wondering, which is precisely what we hope students do as they traverse the campus terrain.

Different Places, Different Prompts

While we have focused mostly on the impact on students, we believe that it is just as important to document the impact that assignments like this can have on instructors. Especially in a profession defined by rootlessness, campus-based assignments offer a viable means for teachers to learn about the institutional geographies they, at times tenuously, inhabit.

As a result of this assignment, long after the term ended, Lance retained a deepened appreciation for student life on the UCI campus—for what places students inhabited when not in class, and for how they made use of campus resources in parks and quads, restrooms and libraries. Lance also came to inhabit the campus more deliberately, and to make use of it in his teaching. For example, Lance has since held class meetings in a space in Aldrich Park, which students noted as welcoming. And though Lance's background is in the humanities, he took to working in the science library, whose virtues of space and light were highlighted in multiple student papers. Lance suspects that students, too, might more deliberately inhabit the spaces they discovered and discussed on the tour and in their writing. In a different fashion, Jens has experienced the benefits of campus-based pedagogy after accepting a position that required a coast-to-coast relocation. In his first term of teaching at his new institution, Jens deployed campus-based assignments in an introductory writing course for ELL students. Some students had more experience with the campus than Jens did. Though initially thrown off by feeling that he was not knowledgeable enough about the new terrain to incorporate it into the course, Jens found that there was an added measure of authenticity to the way he both framed the assignments for students and responded to their rough drafts. That is, there was a renewed exigence for Jens to draw pedagogical inspiration from his surroundings.

Importantly, the assignment we present here is not the assignment of everywhere. An assignment like this requires local, grounded texts that invite responses from students. In this way, such an assignment poses challenges to instructors precisely because it is fueled by the particularities of place. This caveat, which ought to accompany any call for place-based pedagogy, is expressed eloquently by Douglass Reichert Powell (2012) in his work on developing teaching practices that incorporate critical regionalism: "It would be paradoxical, at least, to offer a prepackaged set of tips or tricks [...], since the details of any such project must be determined in a generative relationship to the local landscape and the

particular admixture of broader forces that converge there" (p. 191). Following Powell, we believe that this particularity is not a weakness but a strength of the specific assignment we offer and of campus-based pedagogy more broadly.

We want to leave readers interested in adapting this assignment to their own institutional geographies with two important principles. First, discern the features of your campus that make it distinctive. For instance, at UCI, the campus park and the architectural style of the original buildings distinguish it from other campuses. Students encounter these features often, but are rarely asked to think about them, read about them, or write about them. What features of your campus do you want to make a part of the pedagogical endeavor? Second, find sources that are relevant to your campus and then build your assignments around these sources. Recognizing that both Cronon and Hess advanced original arguments about the campus, Lance realized he could have students rely on their own authority as campus inhabitants to oppose or complicate the arguments advanced in the assigned readings. Relatedly, we would strongly encourage instructors to scour campus newspapers and other campus publications for possible readings. Any piece of writing that makes a claim about the campus can be rich material for walking (or wandering) local and arguing local.

Assignment: Arguing Architecture, Arguing Nature

See the Supplementary Files for this article at thepromptjournal.com for a PDF facsimile of the original formatting of this assignment.

1000-word Argumentative Essay

You must present your opinion about a space on our campus, and in so doing, respond to someone else's opinion about that space. You have two choices:

- Nature Option: Make observations about nature here on campus that respond to Cronon. What does Cronon say nature is? What, in *your* opinion, is nature? And how does Aldrich Park--or some other "natural" space on campus--fit or not fit that definition? For this option, remember that when writing philosophical essays, it is important to define your terms (e.g. nature). It sometimes helps to define your term by opposing it to another common term or to a term or terms you make up (i.e. artificial, art, naturey, etc.).
- Architecture Option: Make observations about campus architecture that respond to Hess. Pick a building or two you know well and answer the questions below in the order you see fit. In YOUR opinion, is the campus architecture beautiful, or brutal, or something else? (Bonus if you say it is not beautiful or beautiful, but something else,

and if you can define what that something else is and give evidence of it.) Consider the features noted by Hess, including passive solar "fins," raised terraces, raw concrete, and so on. Whatever building you focus on, it will help to view the building from different perspectives (i.e. from out front, below, inside on the 5th floor, the roof, etc.) and at different times of day (during passing period, at night, etc.).

Whether you respond to Hess or Cronon, when you summarize the author's perspective, be sure to include at least two different comments from that author (via paraphrase and/or quotation). Also, as you present your perspective, use transitional words to make it clear whether you are adding to, contradicting, or agreeing with the source's opinion.

Your purpose for this writing assignment is primarily to convince. Your firsthand observations will support your opinion. Thus, you should use specific nouns, action verbs, and colorful adjectives as you describe the place. These will enable your readers to picture the place in their minds after reading your commentary. You'll definitely need to use discipline-specific vocabulary, whether from architects and architectural critics or philosophers and naturalists.

Finally, to support your opinion, you might also dig up other observations about our campus from the following sources: [Campus-specific list].

In preparation for peer review, please provide brief directions in your writing for how a peer can find this place in order to observe it.

"You Say, I Say" Peer Response (250 words)

Visit the place described by your peer and respond to their observations. Find in their writing at least one comment that you can agree with, and one comment that you're able to contradict or add to. Be sure to respond to both by providing your own evidence (i.e. observations).

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Assessing, Deliberating, Responding: An Annotated Bibliography for a Post-Truth Age

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Abstract: The *Infosphere Probe* is a project geared toward re-envisioning some features of traditional annotated bibliography assignments in an attempt to empower contemporary information citizens. By challenging students to assess the information circulating in their everyday lives, the *Infosphere Probe* explores strategies with which contemporary classrooms might nurture and cultivate empowered information practices that appreciate lived information cultures traditionally neglected within academic discourse.

Introduction: Lived Information Cultures

College writers compose in crisis. A multitude of crises might qualify as referents for this statement, but it is the crisis affecting contemporary students commonly labelled *post-truth* that has most-recently captured the attention of many within higher education (Carillo, 2018; Peters, 2017). Bruce McComiskey (2017) cites the Oxford Dictionaries' definition of post-truth, referring to an information landscape in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (p. 5). Suffice it to say, contemporary students write and compose both informally and academically each day within complex rhetorical situations that are characterized by highly hybridized forms of media, complicated information streams, and competing rhetorical exigences. In an age of constant uncertainty surrounding the validity and motives of circulating information, the ability to discern and assess the value of that information is more complicated than ever.

This essay explores the complicated rhetorical situations modern students confront, arguing that a targeted, revitalized version of an annotated bibliography assignment in college

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classrooms is capable of nurturing versatile, dynamic practices as students assess, deliberate, and respond to increasingly complex information ecologies. The assignment outlined here acts on the belief that the information students happen upon in their everyday lives—the Tumblr fandoms they are a part of, the video gaming Twitch streams they subscribe to, the *2 Dope Queens* podcast they listen to on the bus that brings them to class—function as sites of identity, culture, and literacy formation, and as such are just as integral to the work of the university classroom as more established "academic" information practices.

Approaches for mobilizing students' "extra-curricular" or "extra-academic" literacies have been outlined by a diverse array of writers in higher education, including Chiseri-Strater (1991), Gere (1994), and Roozen (2008). So far, however, the relationships between these extra-curricular literacies and the annotated bibliography assignments commonly assigned in many classrooms have remained comparatively underexplored. This essay strives to rally these at-home literacies as meaningful sites of cultural knowledge. When foregrounded in a revised annotated bibliography assignment, these literacies may prove capable of nurturing practices that connect information literacy with the possibility of dissolving, at least partially, the fictitious divide between "academic" literacies and the various lived cultural literacies students bring to the classroom. These literacies that students contribute, what I call *lived information cultures*, can be foregrounded in college classrooms in ways that respond to complex information ecologies strategically and tactically for the benefit of our classrooms and our students. Initiatives that challenge students to "read against the grain" are already a well-established practice in post-colonial and critical race studies and pedagogies (Hartman, 2007; Lowe, 2015; Smallwood, 2007). This project attempts to extend these critical reading practices to a large array of documents, texts, media, and phenomena that influence students' lives. If we devise ways to foreground these lived information cultures, we might also find ways to realize students' traditionally-excluded lived literacies as visible, valuable sites for literacy education.

This essay does not attempt to solve or to address the complex, multifaceted problems contained in the term post-truth, but it does propose a new method to cultivate important skills of information literacy that more accurately explore students' lived information cultures. In an age dominated by social media, smartphones, and ubiquitous computing in which the term *writer* is nearly synonymous with the term *digital writer*, the stakes for higher education are quite clear: the relationship central to education that is formed between students and the information they encounter is rapidly transforming. Such a situation complicates the rhetorical situations that students face and conduct academic work in, and inspires the question of what forms of writing and academic assignments might nurture responsible, empowered information practices within an age of perpetual information uncertainty.[1]

An assignment that could help empower students' informational literacy skills is an annotated bibliography assignment called the *Infosphere Probe* that asks students to reflect on their

habitual, everyday practices and relationships with the information they consume. This assignment invites students to explore how their own beliefs, emotions, and approaches to the world come to be informed by their relationships with the information they encounter. The assignment then mobilizes these reflections toward a clear goal: to probe practices of modern information consumption, and then to assess, deliberate, and help students to respond productively with lived information cultures in mind.

Project: The *Infosphere Probe*

The *Infosphere Probe* asks students to survey and collect examples of discourse surrounding a social, cultural, or political issue from streams of information traditionally not foregrounded within academic discourse, in addition to several more traditional genres of academic analysis: a peer-reviewed academic journal article, but also two Tweets or similar social media posts, a popular news article from a newspaper or web-based news site, an opinion piece from a newspaper or online news source that makes an argument concerning the topic at hand, and a news program or television talk show video segment (likely found on YouTube). Finally, students are challenged to additionally assemble four streams of information the assignment has not yet formally called for of the student's own original choosing.

This final component represents the core *raison-d'être* of the assignment design. The assignment encourages students to take risks here, to find original information streams that the assignment does not formally codify. Some students mobilized verbal streams of information into their *Infosphere Probe*, noting and transcribing summaries of conversations they had had on the phone with their parents or heard in conversation on the public transit system that morning. One student found a Tweet that led her to a blog documenting the dangers of an anti-vaccination campaign, while another student was led to the Instagram account of a well-known journalist associated with the #MeToo movement, allowing her to mobilize the entire Instagram account as a site of analysis rather than just one specific post. Students also collected and explored information streams that were entirely off the beaten path—including the probing of podcasts, internet memes, commercials, advertisements, graffiti, Twitch video game streams, political cartoons, songs, poems, stories, smartphone applications, TikTok videos, articles from *The Onion*, bumper stickers, junk mail content sent to email accounts, conversations overheard at the library, interviews with parents and family members, even flyers found in mailboxes—all of which are impactful and valuable components of various infospheres.

Along the way, students discover how worldviews, attitudes, perspectives, and identities are formed through media streams that are directly investigated only infrequently in the college classroom. The *Infosphere Probe* challenges students to examine both mass information streams they encounter regularly (mass-market films, morning radio, paperback books,

newspaper articles) and more specialized information streams introduced to them within this project (such as public radio stations like *NPR*, podcasts such as *2 Dope Queens* and *Modern Love*, Instagram posts from amateurs and from corporate entities, even hashtags found on Twitter arising out of a grassroots political protest contrasted to those promoted in a television commercial). The reflective aspects of this assignment are crucial. We are careful to discuss the information streams present in students' everyday lives: how they consume news, whether it be on television or through social media; how they hear about issues of national prominence, and how they do or do not discuss these issues; how they might possibly *respond* to public policy debates, whether in writing or in another form.

I chose to name the assignment the *Infosphere Probe* for two reasons. First, the word *infosphere* was deliberately chosen for its active, unfixed, and energetic connotations, and also for its overtones of distributed, collaborative, and ecological approaches to discourse production championed by composition theorists such as Karen Burke LeFevre (1986) and Jenny Edbauer (2005). The word *infosphere* contains denotative definitions of "the movement of information," in a "dynamic environment" of complex actors "concerned with the collection and processing of information," according to the *Oxford English Living Dictionary*. By examining a variety of layers within the chosen issue's accompanying infosphere, students translate old knowledge of media forms into new, constructed knowledge of motive, currency, value, and bias, all the while mobilizing existing literacy skills into a complex, layered exploration of the many forms of information vital to our conceptions of lived information cultures. Secondly, the word *probe* is meant to elicit an understanding of the assignment as an exploration, as an exercise of discovery, as an expedition into the unknown. It is a word choice intended to invoke attitudes of discovery, attitudes in which it is okay to step out into something new, to take risks.[2]

***Praxis*: Assessing, Deliberating, Responding**

Annotated bibliographies are by no means a homogeneous genre of assignments, but they generally tend to entail similar practices and learning outcomes. In general, these assignments tend to value documents, texts, and discourses perceived as "academic" more highly than those deemed "popular" or "unscholarly." Painting with a broad brush, I observe that annotated bibliography assignments oftentimes attempt to jump-start the research process in preparation for a larger assignment or project, as a number of popular composition textbooks at least partially endorse (see Alfano & O'Brien, 2016; Clark, 2016). Annotated bibliography assignments exist in a broad array of forms, variations, and instantiations, and rather than cement a static, single, "traditional" interpretation of what an annotated bibliography is, this essay deliberately uses the term "established" to characterize annotated bibliography assignments that, while at times privileging texts that embody power and privilege, have also contributed valuable knowledge and learning to college classrooms. "Established" annotated bibliography assignments are not homogeneous,

uniform, or unvarying, and help nurture a number of valuable skills for college learners, but in general they do tend to work toward goals and outcomes differing from those foregrounded in the *Infosphere Probe*.

Established annotated bibliography assignments do not always emphasize the whole of an infosphere, the many popular dimensions that are frequently at the forefront of a student's information-consumption lives. For example, an "established" version of an annotated bibliography assignment primarily valuing academic books and research articles might not readily challenge a student to locate and survey the Tweets surrounding the 2018 murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, or to compare the reaction to Khashoggi's murder on vlogs to those on corporate-managed YouTube media accounts, or to critique the coverage of the event by television and in internet spaces from major media outlets compared to the reception from general news podcasts such as *The Daily* and more specialized podcasts like *Pod Save the People*. Similarly, these assignments oftentimes ignore what a student might hear on the "street" from their parents, friends, and professors; what students might overhear in the fast-food line or on the campus bus; or what that student might be exposed to in one manner in high school but quite differently in collegiate settings.

After teaching an "established" version of an annotated bibliography assignment for a number of semesters, I began to consider the literacies that tend to be nurtured by these annotated bibliography designs (academic and scholarly, generally focusing on university databases and academic journals, with occasional "popular" sources such as web articles and magazine stories spliced in) and the literacies they tended to focus on less frequently (those literacies that students rally in most other facets of their lives). The *Infosphere Probe* emerged as I resolved to design an occasion for my students, distinct from established annotated bibliography assignment designs, in which students might productively explore and discover within the information spheres so integral to their information lives. I began to question what we as instructors were nurturing, asking students to only research in "academic" spaces such as university databases for content that is unfamiliar to them. Would it not be equally beneficial, I began to believe, to have students mine what is familiar to them? Would it not be beneficial to ask students to reflect on and explore their actual lived information cultures, in all of their diversity and difference, rather than teach only sanitized, homogenized, and monolithic approaches to what types of information are valued in the classroom? This approach would, at minimum, empower and make visible the cultural and personal literacies students are typically taught to stow away upon entering conventional college classrooms.[3]

Many established approaches to the annotated bibliography do not prioritize research practices that encompass all aspects of a contemporary infosphere, including all of its digital components and the lived information cultures of students, researchers, and writers. When we privilege an emphasis on locating and articulating the merits of *only* academic

resources, and forgo extending research into an entire infosphere, we privilege content that is narrowly-defined, content that diverges greatly from students' lived information cultures, and content that represents only a small facet of the texts that might inform students' forays into the conversations of their culture. These privileged texts often uphold structural hierarchies along lines of race, gender, class, and ability, and can implicitly deny students the ability to bring the narratives and counternarratives important to them into the classroom as sources of information that impact their unique lived information lives. While ignoring academic texts entirely would do a disservice to students by limiting access to valuable existing scholarship that might help them to survey a cultural conversation or a lived information culture, exploring both conventionally-neglected information sources in addition to more conventional academic texts ensures students probe as much of an infosphere as possible. In this way, students examine the diverse array of texts to be found in a particular cultural conversation's infosphere without ignoring the insights of valuable academic research. Among the goals of the *Infosphere Probe* is to immerse students within a plurality of texts from a variety of different authorial backgrounds and with a variety of different purposes, motives, exigencies, styles, and modes of expression. The goal is to pluralize what counts as a meaningful academic resource without excluding conventional academic resources, which still remain quite valuable within the *Infosphere Probe*.

A re-thought annotated bibliography assignment might be wise to mobilize the narratives and counternarratives that help constitute students' lived information cultures, consciously framing them as assets to the classroom community in all of their plurality, their diversity, and their valued difference. By consciously reflecting on how diverse information cultures create a classroom environment in which we can learn from one another and appreciate the generative possibilities of our differences, we are able to partially realize the benefits of a manifold, deliberately heterogeneous approach to literate action in our classrooms, as championed by theorists such as Elaine Richardson (2003), Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010), and Barrett et al. (2018). Following this, the *Infosphere Probe* represents one possible classroom initiative in which the historically-excluded literacies that students of color and students from underrepresented groups bring can be not just discussed, but rather foregrounded, made visible, and celebrated for their rich contributions to our classroom literacy education.

An approach to the annotated bibliography assignment that visibly foregrounds information plurality might challenge students to explore, to survey, and to assess and deliberate upon as many different, multifaceted information streams and media forms as possible. Asking a student to assess the currency, authority, relevance, reliability, purpose, motives, circulation, and overall value of "academic" resources is crucial and paramount to cultivating empowered information citizens, but teaching them to assess and deliberate on *all* forms of rhetorical communications they encounter in contemporary infospheres assures students are taking steps toward framing information literacy as an approach for use both inside and outside of the college classroom. This approach to the annotated biobibliography

assignment and to framing lived information cultures is by no means the only method educators might employ toward furthering the goals outlined here, but this approach does present one tangible strategy for mobilizing extra-curricular literacies in a college-level assignment. Groundbreaking and impactful work on reading archives and information sources "against the grain" has been extensively articulated in disciplines such as critical race studies (see Hartman, 2007; and Smallwood, 2007) and postcolonial historiography (see Lowe, 2015), presenting valuable exigences for students to assess, deliberate, and respond productively to information they encounter through academic assignments such as the annotated bibliography.

The *Infosphere Probe* draws upon these valuable critical reading strategies and mobilizes similar practices of thoughtful, strategic interpretation by challenging students to ask which groups of people author, benefit from, and work to amplify or extend the reach of particular information sources. In this way, the *Infosphere Probe* assignment extends previous critical reading research to probe infospheres against the grain, broadening the ways students approach power, privilege, and the interpretation of information. Challenging students to read information and infospheres in tactful ways is not unique to this assignment, but the framing, goals, and outcomes in this particular case are strategically designed to expand students' conceptions of how to engage productively with texts, information ecologies, and cultural artifacts, as well to nurture the capacities of students to assess, deliberate on, and respond to infospheres of importance. The response outlined here is by no means the only way instructors and teacher-scholars have responded to contemporary information exigences, but nonetheless, the approach may be of use to instructors wishing to pluralize and diversify the texts their students engage with, critique, and use to inform themselves within a particular course setup or curriculum.

Method: Designing Occasions for Inquiry

I most recently taught this iteration of the *Infosphere Probe* during the Spring semester of 2020 in a first-year composition (FYC) course. As this was a general education course, a diverse spectrum of majors was represented spanning the humanities, STEM, and other fields and disciplines. This particular course functioned as a broad introduction to rhetoric, composition, and academic genres, and oftentimes challenged students to engage with social and cultural issues through research and argument practices. Although the *Infosphere Probe* was generally considered a stand-alone assignment, the practices in researching, analysis, and information appraisal were continually drawn on in subsequent assignments, including in researched argument-driven and multimodal composition projects that followed completion of the *Infosphere Probe* in the course. Both of these subsequent projects drew upon the skills of research, analysis, and creative engagement with cultural artifacts that the *Infosphere Probe* nurtures. In other words, students seemed to benefit in the remaining arc of the course from the in-depth engagement with both familiar and unfamiliar cultures,

literacies, and points of view necessitated by the *Infosphere Probe*. For instance, the course's final project challenged students to create a multimodal text examining our university's histories with structural racism, slavery, and race-based exploitation, and the *Infosphere Probe*'s deep engagement with critical analysis of a wide variety of information sources helped prepare students for research in our university archives, which contain information in a variety of forms.

Upon beginning the project, I first showed students sample projects voluntarily shared by students from previous iterations of the course to give them an idea of how they might engage the goals of the assignment in their own way. I then provided students free time to explore topics that might be of interest to them from two similar websites, ProCon.org and Kialo.com. These sites perform similar functions for students, as they outline the parameters of a cultural conversation, sketching and depicting various key figures, events, or points of contention within that conversation. For instance, one student explored ProCon and found an article surveying the cultural conversation surrounding standardized testing in American high schools, a topic of which she had first-hand experience and knowledge. Other students approached these websites more heuristically, using them to visualize what cultural conversations might look like and innovating from there based on their own experiences or interests. An important aspect of this project is that students select a topic that furthers the goals of the assignment, but that also engages their own interests, experiences, or histories, including topics that facilitate exploration of their individual lived information cultures.

The array of student writing resulting from this assignment was diverse, and facilitated not only valuable conversations surrounding information and literacy, but also furthered discussions of lived information cultures as we moved throughout the full arc of the course. One student, an engineering major, traced public discussion of recent Boeing plane crashes across academic journal articles, YouTube conspiracy videos, a political cartoon, even technical documents showcasing the layouts of the planes released by Boeing itself. Another student who studied environmental science probed the impact of feral pigs on local ecosystems, interviewing her grandfather and a local farmer for their opinions, as well as assembling a local DEC document, a bumper sticker, a television program, and even a viral meme to explore the issue.

After researching, exploring, and assembling their information sources, students then cite each source using proper MLA documentation and compose a paragraph of analysis for each source. After students assemble their various streams of information, the *Infosphere Probe* challenges them to probe and explore questions related to the source's credibility, intended audience, purpose, motive, and information type (i.e. do students think the information is opinion, speculation, scientific, descriptive, narrative, or something else?). This sort of analysis does not diverge heavily from other forms of annotated bibliography assignments. However, the *Infosphere Probe* then challenges students to probe each information source for other questions that engage the larger goals of the assignment, including how the medium

of delivery impacts the contained information, how each source represents particular groups of people, and who students think might agree or disagree with the information each source contains. Lastly, students are asked to reflect on how that source represents someone's lived information culture, including their own.

Some students struggled initially to come to terms with the goals, purpose, and intended learning outcomes of the assignment, but after beginning the process of researching, most seemed to embrace the opportunity to "dig deep" and explore their everyday information lives and information diversities. For example, one student who otherwise only infrequently participated vocally in course discussions ended up being one of the more expressive participants throughout the arc of this project because it allowed her to engage her firm opposition to the building of a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. Additionally, another student clearly found the project intellectually invigorating, narrowing his topic from smartphones to artificial intelligence and finally to digital surveillance based upon the assembled research items he found. The project's ultimate goals of discovery, exploration, creative inquiry, and critical reflection were pushed and expanded continually, with students navigating real-world, public rhetorical ecologies and discourse communities and then probing, sorting, and responding to the information they had investigated. These goals helped prepare students not only for the research-intensive argumentative and multimodal projects that followed the *Infosphere Probe*, but also for the critical reflection, creative capacities, and understanding of diverse literacies that the remainder of the course continued to engage.

Upon completing the primary components of the project, students are then challenged to assemble a short *Infosphere Analysis*, a summary exercise which reflects on and outlines the probing and exploring the student has processed and uncovered. The *Infosphere Analysis* is a short document (2 paragraphs or so) intended to chronicle, compare, contrast, and synthesize the different components of the infosphere the student's investigation has uncovered. Importantly, the *Infosphere Analysis* is not an attempt to reconcile incompatible, conflicting, or clashing content discovered in differing streams of information. Rather, it works as an attempt to cultivate approaches to information valuing and appraisal that are flexible, culturally empowered, and that appreciates the value heterogeneous arrays of information streams can provide.

Conclusions: Probing Broadly Across Disciplines

The framing outlined here is one of many possible approaches attempting to mobilize extra-curricular literacies and "against the grain" reading practices to more fully respond to complex information landscapes, and a variety of applications in other disciplines and courses might approach the *Infosphere Probe* in fresh, innovative ways. For example, in an engineering course, a variation of the *Infosphere Probe* project outlined here might ask students to trace cultural conversations surrounding autonomous vehicles or hardware

advances in quantum computing in an effort to extend student inquiry, reflection, and problem assessment, and to broaden students' understandings of possible outcomes and ramifications resulting from particular engineering decisions. Similarly, in a science course, this sort of initiative might challenge students to explore climate change discourse within their own lived information cultures, extending course content and conversation into the constellation of circulating media discourses so integral to the formulation of the climate crisis. If we as educators are to foster environments of inquiry, exploration, and informed information practices, we would benefit from designing occasions for our students in which they are free to explore an issue within their culture as it is developed in-process and in-motion by a variety of interested voices.

Assignment: The Infosphere Probe

(To view a PDF facsimile of the original formatting of this assignment, return to this article's homepage and locate the link to the "Assignment" PDF.)

Assigned: Wk. 5 Due: Wk. 9

Think about it. Information is all around you, surrounding you, circulating on your phone, your computer, in your mind. Information permeates every experience you have. Information arrives to you from the evening news, from calls home to your family, from your social media feeds, from the signs you see on the street and on TV. The information you encounter helps to expose you to new ideas or to repeat old ones. This information might try to sell you on some product; it may present an event in a particular frame or lens or narrative; it may try to persuade you to believe in a particular point of view; it might even attempt to mislead you or to deceive you in some way. Undoubtedly, though, the information a person encounters helps to determine that person's opinions on social, cultural and political issues that have real-life impacts on the world we all contribute to. The information a person is exposed to, then, goes a long way toward influencing that person's approach to their world and to particular issues, and helps to form a *lived information culture* that person might develop.

This assignment challenges you to *probe* these ideas by investigating an *infosphere* to assess a conversation happening in our culture surrounding some issue of social, political or wider cultural importance. An *infosphere* is a conversation surrounding a particular topic that occurs on Twitter, on the evening news, in conversations on the street, in coffeeshops, in all realms in which people communicate with one another, both online and off. An *infosphere* is made up of Tumblr fandom blogs, of Twitch video game streams, of podcasts like *2 Dope Queens* or *Crime Junkie* that you listen to on the bus on your way to class. The conversation you investigate may take on a variety of forms, but a good place to start might

be in venturing a possible answer to the question: *What is the most important social or cultural issue currently impacting your life*?

To assess a conversation from a variety of information streams that we as information citizens encounter on a daily basis, you will survey and assess: (**A**) A **peer-reviewed academic journal article** that relates to your cultural issue; (**B**) A **popular news article** from a newspaper or web-based news site, national or local; (**C**) An **opinion article published online** that make an argument regarding your topic (**D**) **Two Tweets, blog posts, or similar social media posts**, (**E**) A **news program or television talk show** segment (likely found on YouTube), and (**F**) **Four streams of information this assignment hasn't yet formally called for *of your own original choosing*** (students in the past have found podcasts, internet memes, commercials, advertisements, graffiti, Twitch streams, political cartoons, songs, poems, stories, smartphone applications, *TikTok* videos, articles from *The Onion* and other satire news sites, bumper stickers, junkmail content sent to email accounts, conversations overheard at the library, flyers found in mailboxes, etc.). Be creative and push boundaries. Bonus points if you ask a parent, a guardian, a friend, or a professor for their perspectives on your issue, or if you overhear something on the bus, in the fast-food line, or in the hallway. A major point of priority with this project is the realization that streams of information turn up in every facet of our lives, even in places we'd normally not consider worthy of academic attention and scrutiny. These everyday information streams, ultimately, help to make us who we are, and inform our knowledge of the people, cultures, and communities of the world. *Part of this assignment asks you to draw on your own personal background, history, heritage, or story to probe how the information found in your life has impacted your identity, your outlook, and your view of the world.*

When you've located the above materials, cite them using proper MLA format (see Purdue OWL resources), and then write a short paragraph for each source type or component letter (ex. write a single paragraph for the two Tweets/social media posts you've found, not a paragraph for each Tweet, though you will write an individual paragraph for each of your four unique materials; you'll have **9 paragraphs total, plus your 2-paragraph *Infosphere Analysis***). Each *Infosphere Probe* paragraph will **probe and explore *any or all* of the following questions**: What types of information is contained here– opinion, speculation, factual, scientific, descriptive, narrative, etc.? What is the purpose or motive of the source? What is its currency, authority, relevancy, or circulation? Who is its audience? Who might agree/disagree/respond? How does the particular medium of information delivery impact the content of the source? How does the source represent someone's *lived information culture*? How are particular groups, peoples, or communities represented, articulated, empowered, or made visible by the source? Your contribution will be assessed based upon the level of detail within your analysis as well as the engagement with the learning objectives of the assignment that you display.

When you've completed the 9 paragraphs that form your *Infosphere Probe*, close this project by assembling a 2-paragraph *Infosphere Analysis* in which you explain to your reader what your *probe* uncovered: What did you find? What are people in the infosphere saying about your cultural issue? How do people connect in their opinions? How do they diverge? How are the texts you've assembled intertextual? How do they interact with one another? Did you find moments of consensus, conflict, synthesis? What struck you or surprised you? How do the differences between stakeholders in your infosphere inform popular culture, public sentiment, or political happenings? The goal of this *Infosphere Analysis* is not to reconcile, summarize, or condense conflicting or clashing information found in your infosphere exploration, but rather should be an attempt to explain the value that flexible, culturally-empowered, and diverse arrays of information streams can provide to understanding cultural issues.

Notes

[1]Fortunately, the phenomena of *post-truth* have not occurred without a variety of both academic and popular responses. In the field of library and information sciences, Mary K. Oberlies and Janna Mattson's *Framing Information Literacy* (2018) features a number of essays useful to instructors attempting to mobilize multifaceted, rounded digital literacy strategies in their students through active learning assignments and activities. Similarly, Mary Snyder Broussard's book *Reading, Research, and Writing* (2017) ventures to connect information literacy with the *processes* of reading, researching and responding so crucial to writers in *post-truth* environments. Additionally, the anthology *Alternative Facts, Post-Truth and the Information War* (2018) collects pieces from various popular news sources that outline the *post-truth* phenomenon and explore some of its specific manifestations, many of which instructors might draw on to illustrate *post-truth* for their students.

[2]A student does not need to have an in-depth knowledge of the ins-and-outs of Twitter to *probe* the conversation happening there surrounding the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. Additionally, much new knowledge can be stumbled upon in the exploratory research process the *Infosphere Probe* encourages, such as a student discovering podcasts such as *Broken English* and *Status* that provide first-hand stories and perspectives from immigrants to the U.S. One change I hope to employ in future iterations of this assignment is to encourage students to more visibly acknowledge the intended audience for a particular text or artifact, and to challenge students to speculate as to how that text caters to a particular group of people. I envision a comparative element to this initiative in which students compare and contrast how different texts serve different ends, including for privileged and marginalized groups.

[3]The classroom should be a place in which student plurality, diversity, and difference are valued and celebrated. In the annotated bibliography assignments I had been teaching, the frame of mind we cultivated implicitly conveyed to students that informational materials they find inside of the formal confines of the college classroom bear little resemblance to the opinions, expressions, and rhetorical appeals they encounter on their smartphone's Twitter and Instagram applications, on the advertisements streamed on services such as *Hulu* or *Netflix*, or on the podcasts and YouTube communications so omnipresent in contemporary life.

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Putting US Back in Museums: Increasing Student Engagement via Experiential Learning Writing Assignments

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Abstract: This paper details the evolution of a course, Arts and Society, and the inception of a student-centered assignment, "Putting US back in Museums." By tapping into a nationwide discussion of inclusion and public spaces, this business-proposal-style assignment asks students to consider their own observations as museum visitors alongside research on community engagement, diversity and accessibility. Students aim to identify a specific issue within a museum and to propose change. Throughout the project, students are supported by the implementation of smaller scaffolding assignments, in-class discussions, an embedded librarian, and an assigned writing fellow. Furthermore, they meet at least eight professionals in the field and visit at least four different local sites. This assignment demonstrates best practices via scaffolding, institutional support, experiential learning, and engagement with the local community.

Course Context

The course, "Artivism: An Introduction to Arts and Society," is a writing-intensive, general education course taught in person.[1] This course is required for our Integrated Arts majors, but it is also a popular elective for other students. By visiting local museums and meeting with museum staff, students examine how museums function rhetorically, giving voice and visibility to certain populations while excluding others. Throughout the course, students complete smaller assignments and participate in class discussions that enrich the depth

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of their final project. As their final project, students identify a specific problem within a museum exhibit and propose changes. Following a traditional business proposal format, students write to an institutional leader, in this case a specific individual working for a museum, typically a curator or public engagement director. The first section of their paper addresses the problem they found as related to one of the following issues: a) diversity b) accessibility or c) public engagement. In the next section, by conducting research, they address how other institutions have handled similar problems in a literature review. In the following section, they propose detailed changes. As the final piece to this proposal, they suggest an event that would help to promote the revised exhibit (e.g. a launch party, a musical guest, a workshop for children). I then invite curators and other professionals to attend class and the students pitch their proposals to the museum professionals. Students prepare a five-minute presentation and a visual aid to assist them in making their arguments. Many of them have chosen to create dioramas of their new spaces, while others who are gifted technologically have created virtual renderings of their spaces either via graphically-designed images or in virtual 3-D models.

The use of writing in this course is twofold. On the one hand, students are writing to learn. For each onsite visit, they are required to write reflectively (four separate two-page reflections). These documents incorporate observations and photographs, recording the degree to which they believe the museum succeeds in three areas: 1) engaging and welcoming the local community, 2) demonstrating a commitment to diversity in both hiring practices and art displayed, and 3) accommodating those with diverse abilities.

On the other hand, students are also learning to write for an authentic situation. During the course, they will have met many of the individuals who work at our museums, and they understand that these individuals (or individuals like them) are people who could enact or propose change. They are consistently reading materials created by activists and museum professionals to familiarize themselves with tone and content of such work. With this audience in mind, they ultimately develop a proposal which includes an overview of the problem, a literature review of how other institutions have handled similar issues, and a plan to revise one particular exhibit.

Artistic License: Considering Your Students When Designing Assignments

The most interesting thing about this assignment is how and why it evolved. At my former institution, I was a Writing Program Administrator. In my current position, I operate in two separate departments: English and Integrated Arts. The "Arts and Society" course is housed in the Integrated Arts program, a program designed for students who will work in the arts industry or who will be managing themselves as artists. Prior to my modifications, the course was a fairly straightforward exploration of key artistic periods.

In an effort to offer more experiential learning opportunities, I decided to take advantage

of our campus's proximity to key artistic locations. For my first excursion, I took the students to the Walters Art Museum (walkable from campus), and I asked them to conduct a rhetorical analysis of the Renaissance exhibit, using visual clues to identify the arguments about identity and class during this time. But as I followed them through the exhibit, a much more interesting conversation emerged.

First, most of them told me that even though they were from Baltimore, they had never been to the Walters. Second, there were those who indicated they felt uncomfortable in museums. Memorably, one student said, "The people on the walls and the people in the halls, they don't look like me. This place wasn't made for us." However, they also commented that even though there was some discomfort, they loved being outside the classroom.

My overhaul of the curriculum began that evening.

Broad Strokes: Making the Assignment

I knew I wanted to incorporate reflective writing as a means of asserting that each student's experience of a space was valid and deserved an audience. Thus, in the short papers attached to each visit, students refer to their own life experiences, their experiences as a patron, and perhaps their own work experience in order to assess where a museum has clearly made effort to improve its practices and where a museum could improve. In these documents, students often embed images as evidence. For instance, one student included a photograph of an expensive café menu to comment on the impractical nature of affording such options as a single mother, while another student who also worked as a contractor focused on steps that were aesthetic but clearly difficult to navigate physically.

I also encourage students to include information they can find from the museum's materials, such as the website, brochures and maps. I provide the questions below to guide their analyses:

Accessibility

- How easy is it to park?
- Are elevators easy to find?
- Are signs/labels easy to read? Braille offered? Audioguides? Alternative languages?
- Is there enough room in every exhibit for a stroller or a wheelchair?
- Does the museum offer sound-reducing headphones/weighted covers/stimulation maps?
- Are there certain days/tour guides available for persons who need additional assistance?
- Are there locations for resting and sitting?
- Does the museum offer gender neutral restrooms/spaces for breastfeeding?

Inclusion

- Does the art represent diverse populations?
- Does the museum represent diverse artists?
- Does the museum hire a diverse staff (at all levels! You may need to look at the website to learn more about curators, board members, etc)?
- Does the museum offer scholarships/internships/volunteer opportunities that encourage diverse applicants?
- Does the museum showcase artist talks, workshops, and other special activities that would cater towards celebrating diversity?
- Does the staff seem welcoming to all patrons?

Public Engagement

- Does the museum work to showcase artists/events that align with community interests?
- Does the museum offer activities for families/children?
- Is the museum affordable (consider museum fees, café prices, parking fees, the cost of souvenirs)?
- Where and how does the museum advertise exhibits and events?
- Does the museum offer opportunities to interact with art ("please touch" exhibits)?
- Does the museum offer interactive technology?
- Does the museum have a place for public feedback or suggestions?

These small reflections set them up for the final proposal project. In designing it, I talked with museum professionals and asked them what types of information they needed in order to propose a change. As a result of these conversations, I created the business proposal prompt which asks students to investigate one of the problems identified in one of their earlier assignments (using their images and other primary source material as evidence), then research potential solutions, and finally, to suggest a change. In this document, they should write for a museum professional as if they belonged to the museum community.[2]

Priming the Canvas: Before the Assignment

Before the semester begins, I plan four visits to four different museums—the American Visionary Art Museum, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, the Walters Art Museum, and the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum. For each visit, I contact the museum in advance to determine which staff members are best suited for interaction with my class. I look for those who have either worked with public outreach initiatives or curators who have shown interest in diversifying the gallery. For instance, the Walters Art Museum held an exhibition called "Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe," and I asked that curator to talk to my students about the process of designing an exhibit of this kind. At other locations, I ask staff members to talk more broadly about their mission and public engagement initiatives.

Notably, I also ask the class to download a phone app called "Remind." Since we are moving around constantly during the class, I wanted a mechanism that would allow consistent dialogue between myself and the students. Remind allows you to send messages directly to a student's phone and vice versa. The messages can include images and links, which is very helpful when the students want to show me something they have seen while visiting a museum. Remind allows you to set up virtual "office hours," too, so a student knows not to expect answers immediately. I have had students from two years ago who are still sending links to either just me or to the entire class extending our dialogue way beyond the constraints of a semester-long class.

For day one of class, I create a tug-of-war style discussion using the statement "Museums are made for everyone." For this discussion strategy, this statement is written on the board with a Yes-No-In-between spectrum created underneath:

Figure 1:

Students write their names on a post-it note and place it on the spectrum above the line. The class is then divided so that those who answered "no" go to one side of the room and those who said "yes" go to the other. Each group makes a list of as many reasons or experiences they can to justify their response. They record one reason per post-it. Then, they rank their answers so that the most compelling answers go closest to the "yes" or "no" ends, while the less compelling answers go towards the middle. For example:

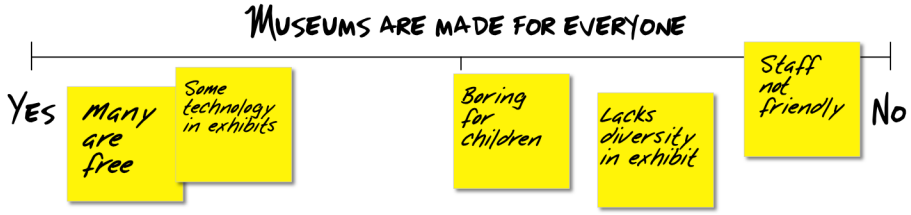

Figure 2:

As the discussion evolves, many comments about racial tension echo what I heard in the Walters Art Museum. Parents lament the difficulty of engaging a teenager immersed in a phone. Students with physical disabilities often note the lack of places to rest. We discuss

how museums are often overwhelming for individuals on the autism spectrum, and they are surprised to learn about how museums have made significant improvements in this area (see Shrikant, 2018). Students reevaluate their stances to see if they have altered their positions. This dialogue establishes the idea that everyone experiences museums differently.

To show my students how their observations fit into our current moment, I introduce them to a current initiative titled "Museums are not Neutral," founded by museum activists LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski. Autry (n.d.) writes,

> [Museums] are political constructs. Their ongoing practices also are rooted in power. The very fact that this field has a long history of excluding and marginalizing people of color in terms of selection, interpretation, and care of art and other objects, jobs, visitor services, board representation, and more indicates that museums are political spaces. Everything in them and about them involves decisions. (para. 1)

I explain that our class will not only assume that museums can improve with regards to racial diversity but also in regards to other issues of inclusion. I show them some of the databases that are dedicated to this issue. For instance, I show them the list of resources Autry provided that demonstrate social justice intersects with museums' practices. The goal is for students to realize that this conversation is timely and important, and that each of them is in a position to be an agent of change.

In a flipped classroom model, students read the articles at home to prepare for each visit. I choose articles that align with each space's mission or recent initiatives. For instance, for the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA), I chose three readings: 1) a newspaper article discussing the BMA's radical decision to sell the works of some major art titans in order to create a "war chest" of funds to be used "to fund future acquisitions of cutting-edge contemporary art, specifically by women and artists of color" (Halperin, 2018), 2) Autry's (n.d.) blog discussing the need for museums to improve diversity, and 3) an article that discusses the importance of retraining security guards to be welcoming to all patrons (Luppi, 2014). For the American Visionary Art museum, I distributed their "Seven Educational Goals" and an article about the importance of art as therapy for inmates, "The effectiveness of art therapy in reducing depression in prison populations" (Gussak, 2007). Ultimately, the goal is to provide at least one article that deals with the particular museum and others that can help students situate the issue within a larger dialogue. Many of them use at least some of these sources in their papers.

Supporting the Process

Once students have visited all of the locations, they either meet with me in person or have phone conferences for further planning. During these conferences, I learn more about their

personal interests and assist them in shaping the specificity of their chosen issue.

The earlier reflections prepare the students well for the first part of the essay, which is to outline the problem. Most of them have enough material from their initial visit to the museum to structure this section.

Then, we have two in-class sessions designed to assist students with finding sources for the literature review section. Navigating museum blogs or sites dedicated to museum activism or education has proven to be a much different process from a database search. This process is streamlined by creating resource guides and by including a librarian in both of our research sessions. We discuss how the language and tone of these resources will be similar to the tone students should employ in their essays.

Next, I conduct a class on how to write a literature review. First, I show them an example of a successful review. Then, I present a faulty model where several pieces of information are loosely related to the topic but are actually too far away to be helpful in solving the problem. Students are required to find and cut the extraneous pieces. Then, I give them a literature review with ineffective organization. I ask students to physically cut the sentences and restructure the information to be more persuasive. Finally, students bring in their own literature review, and we workshop them using the same techniques. What was once the most difficult part of this assignment has been greatly improved by employing these scaffolding steps.

As a means for brainstorming and editing, my students also meet twice with the writing fellow who is attached to our course. In the first meeting, the fellow assists them with how to write a literature review and how to organize their proposal into the required sections. During the second meeting, students come with a complete draft, and the fellow assists with both global and local changes.

On Display: Assessing the Project

Students understand that the most important aspect of this assignment is to establish themselves as someone who is entitled to critique and comment on museum spaces. Their written work is graded on the following criteria: 1) Specificity 2) Organization 3) Incorporation of Evidence 4) Originality of Ideas 4) Adherence to APA 5) Use of Images 6) Meeting with Librarian and Writing Fellow.

I now include a presentation and judging component to enhance the authenticity of the experience. Students convert their proposals into five-minute speeches, accompanied by visual aids. Museum professionals and university administrators agree to judge student projects on the following: 1) professionalism, 2) aesthetics of model, 3) creativity of revision, and 4) realism of suggestion. Each student interacts with three judges. The judges attend class and the students are each given a table and they create name tents for their locations

to be found easily by the judges. The judges are given the names of "their" students at the beginning of class. Each student interacts with three judges. The judges record scores and submit to me for tallying. I announce the winner in the next class. While I have taught this class without this component, I see a dramatic increase in the level of engagement and the quality of the projects by having this step.

A Gallery of Success: Snapshot of Student Work

The diversity of projects has been incredible. For example, one student dedicated a project to her sister who had just given birth at the beginning of the semester. She found an African statue of a new mother at the BMA and proposed an exhibit that not only featured this statue but also provided a comfortable location for breastfeeding. Another student decided to revise a space for the American Visionary Art Museum. After visiting with his son, he noted that the art was very appealing to children—it is made from found objects and other interesting materials—but that there was not a place for children to play. His revision included a playground where the equipment was made from found objects. He noted that the designs would be especially tailored for those with disabilities since the museum endorses art as therapy. In a particularly delicious revision, a student tackled the historic Hackerman House, which is attached to the Walters Art Museum. Having just opened last summer, this house features a room dedicated to Sybby Grant, a woman enslaved there in the 1800s. My student felt that the room overlooked the opportunity to discuss cooking as a form of literacy. She suggested that the room should not only showcase Sybby's recipes more prominently but also to have cooked dishes in the room to add a sensory component to the space.

Experiential Learning: Using a City as Classroom

Through this class and my own research, I have learned that more and more universities are relying on relationships with museums as a means for enhancing curriculum because these locations facilitate a knowledge-based learning economy, improving success and retention (Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). By incorporating museums into student learning, we introduce students to a "resource for lifelong learning" while also allowing "instructors to move away from chalk and talk, increase student engagement, increase content-relevance, provide in-depth coverage of certain areas and improve proficiencies" (Das, 2015, p. 72). In other words, the success of this class has helped me to confirm that even in this digital age, many students want, and will better succeed, in a class that will connect them to their classmates, their instructor, and to their community.

I continue to see benefits of this assignment. The class average has yet to go below a ninety three percent. The quality of writing for these papers is some of the best I have

seen in my career. In a record-breaking event, my writing fellow recorded one hundred and eighty-three writing consultations with my twenty-six students, even though only fifty-two of those visits were mandatory. Also my students continue to use the Remind app after the course is over, taking pictures of themselves at museums, and sending links to events that they think could be interesting for the class. Often, the images showcase students with their families, demonstrating the degree to which the boundary between my students and these institutions has begun to dissolve. In my evaluations, students have noted that this is some of the "easiest" writing they have ever done because they actually cared about solving the problem instead of just finishing the assignment. Perhaps my favorite comment was the student who noted that "my white ass" was her "key to the city." In person, she shared that she was able to see how the conversations we were having in class extended to conversations about who had access to academic spaces.

I look forward to hearing the thoughts of the readers. To contact me, write to rzeleny@ubalt.edu, or you can follow some of my teaching adventures at rachaelmzeleny.com.

Assignment: Museums Are Not Neutral

(To view a PDF facsimile of the original formatting of this assignment, return to this article's homepage and locate the link to the "Assignment" PDF.)

Overview

You will visit the local museums (at least two). While you will need to take notes on each museum, your paper will focus on how you could revise one exhibit to improve either a) diversity b) accessibility or c) public engagement. Consider an event that would help you promote your revised exhibit. And finally, reflect on this experience.

Section 1

Describe the current exhibit, the goals of the exhibit, the types of artists, and the types of art displayed in the exhibit. Consider the strengths and limitations of this exhibit. Don't just make generalizations such as "they should have more wheelchair ramps" or "they could give more informative plaques." Which exhibits? Where exactly? What kind of info?

Section 2

Using at least 4 outside sources, provide a literature review that outlines how other institutions have handled similar problems. Suggested resources: https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/08/31/museums-are-not-neutral/

Section 3

Describe your revised exhibit. Detail what artifacts would be included, what you have done to ensure a commitment to diversity, and what you would do to make the exhibit more accessible to those with disabilities.

Section 4

Describe an event/workshop/kid-friendly activity that would supplement your exhibit. Be specific in your targeted audience, how you would market the event, who might sponsor it, and the purpose of this event.

Section 5

Reflect on the experience of attending these museums and participating in this project. How has this changed the way you experience museums? Has this project changed the likelihood of you visiting a museum in the future? How has this class impacted your thinking about arts and society?

Writing Requirements

- 6 pages (not including images), Times New Roman, Double Spaced, MLA citation, at least TWO sources
- **Note: You MUST visit a museum to complete this project**
- Image Requirement for slides:
- At least 2 images, at least 720 dpi, no bigger than 1.5 by 1.5 inches, captions clarifying content

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Notes

[1]I have taught a version of this class online, and I am more than happy to discuss modifications to this material for anyone who wishes to do so. Please contact me at rzeleny@ubalt.edu

[2]Notably, this proposal does not include the financial obligation, as these numbers would be too difficult for students to obtain at this stage. I have begun conversations regarding the possibility of linking this course to a business class so that we might do this part better and increase the authenticity of the assignment.

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