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Completely Out of My Domain:
An Institutional Narrative of Multimedia Collaboration
By Erik Ellis and Dave Underwood

Abstract

Although rhetoric and composition continues to embrace digital technologies and visual rhetoric, some scholars have criticized the tendency of composition textbooks and instructors to position students as critical consumers rather than active producers of multimodal and multimedia texts (see, for example, Davis & Shadle, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Kress, 2009; Murray, 2009; C. Selfe, 2004; Sheppard, 2009; Shipka, 2011). "In other words," according to Steve Westbrook (2006), "to 'do' visual rhetoric in composition too often means not to work with students on authoring multimedia texts that combine words and images but, rather, to work on critically reading visual artifacts and demonstrating this critical reading through the evidence of a print essay" (p. 460). Of course, to go beyond this more passive model of print-based critical consumption—to help students compose in multimedia—requires some sort of institutional framework.

But what if you don't have one? What if your writing program privileges alphabetic literacy and has no systematic—or even unsystematic—relationship with the technical staff needed to bring a multimedia project to fruition? If you teach composition and want students to pursue a multimedia project, what should you do? The problem is partly physical and spatial. Yes, the logistics of facilitating multimedia projects usually requires, well, a facility. But you need more. You need not only the right technology and constructive relationships with those who oversee it but also an effective multimedia pedagogy. And you need to overcome two personal obstacles: fear and inertia—fear of uncertainty (not to mention fear of reprisal if you rock the curricular boat), and the power of inertia to keep you in your comfort zone. Overcoming these obstacles requires a change in attitude.

Our multimedia narrative traces the evolution of one such shift in attitudes. We reflect on the way our five-year collaboration as composition instructor and manager of Academic Media Services at the University of Colorado at Boulder helped make multimedia composition assignments more practicable than precarious, more routine than rare, and, in turn, how we helped transform the University's Media Lab from a site of custodial oversight to a popular, sustainable crossroads of collaborative, interdisciplinary multimedia pedagogy. For writing instructors and technical support staff, our informal collaborative experiment suggests the potential value of stepping outside one's comfort zone—one's domain—to forge institutional relationships that either don't exist or that lack dialogue and depth. For writing program administrators, our experience might serve as a reminder that innovation often happens at the margins. It may be worthwhile to keep an eye out for it, recognize it as such, and build upon it—maybe even encourage it in the first place.

Part 1. Exigence

Erik: It was winter break, 2004, and I was an instructor in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

The alphabet reigned supreme in my writing classes. Essays were the coin of the realm. The idea that students might use means of persuasion other than letters and words, that they might compose anything other than print texts, had never really occurred to me. Yes, the textbooks were right: Text was general all over campus. My pedagogy swooned slowly as I heard the text falling faintly through the university and faintly falling, like the descent of the next essay, upon all the written and the read.

But that winter I started to reconsider my print-centric world. I was preparing to teach an upper-division business writing course, and I wanted the main project to be a recommendation report about website usability. As much as students love working on hypothetical projects for hypothetical audiences, I figured they might feel more invested if they had a real audience. So rather than ask them to imagine they've been hired by this company or that organization, I would ask them to conduct their website usability tests and write their recommendation reports for real clients with real problems: local businesses or nonprofits with less-than-stellar websites. Rather than line up clients myself, I thought students might feel more invested if they researched, contacted, and individually proposed these organizations during class presentations. Then the class would vote on the top four or five projects. It would be an authentic rhetorical situation, and there would be something at stake in their presentations beyond grades.

After voting on the top clients, students would conduct usability tests with real users, take notes, and use their observations as evidence in their reports, which they would workshop, revise, and deliver to their clients. It all made sense.

But as the semester began, I realized that it would be hard for students to carefully analyze their website usability tests without videotaping them. After all, I wanted students to base their recommendations on solid evidence, not fuzzy memories and bad notes. Again, this was 2004. I had never even heard of screen-capture software, there were no iPhones, and I had no idea if camcorders were available for students to check out on campus. Somehow, I doubted it.

Dave: My department, Academic Media Services, had just come into some money, and our director felt a wise place to sink it would be in a small multimedia lab. He envisioned, and was prepared to fund, a space in which students could rent cameras and tripods, edit videos, and package the works for classroom delivery, either on DVD or online. I was appalled, initially, at the idea of managing a "hard" facility. My background is in graphic design, and my department had traditionally served as a campus-wide service bureau for faculty engaged in research and creative works. The idea of getting mixed up in working directly with students gave me the cold sweats. I'd seen them around on campus, and though I'd been told it was possible to work and even communicate with them, I had my doubts. Now I was being told they would be allowed to

use expensive university equipment and to enlist my “expertise” in the execution of their projects.

Like I said, the cold sweats.

Within weeks of opening the lab, Erik came to us with an idea for a course.

Erik: While part of me wanted to give up my ambitions and just ask students to do their best in the circumstances, another part of me really wanted to do justice to the usability project. I thought the ideal approach would go beyond videotaping the usability tests. Not only would students videotape them, but they would also edit highlights from them into five-minute DVDs to accompany their written recommendation reports. Such a multimodal combo—a well-written report and a well-edited DVD—could deliver a double dose of persuasion. After all, wouldn’t clients respond more viscerally and maybe less defensively to a DVD featuring direct evidence of their website’s usability failures? Rather than just read about how four out of five users found it hard to navigate this page or accomplish that task, clients could actually see people struggle to use their websites. And they could actually hear users groan and sigh and curse. Talk about persuasive. As usability guru Steve Krug (2005) argues in his manifesto *Don’t Make Me Think: A Commonsense Approach to Website Usability*, “When people ask me how they can convince senior management that their organization should invest in usability, my strongest recommendation doesn’t have anything to do with things like ‘demonstrating return on investment.’ The tactic that I think works best is getting management to observe even one user test” (pp. 143-144).

In my utopian vision, not only would usability DVDs help my students’ clients see the validity of their recommendations, but, if everything worked out, the DVDs could also help students feel more invested in the project, in the class, and in their futures as professional communicators.

As excited as I was about the prospect of having students use technology for a real-world project, the thought of asking them to make DVDs in a writing class seemed sacrilegious almost. Wouldn’t people in the writing program accuse me of wasting students’ time rather than teaching them to actually write? Would students resent being asked to stray so far from their expectations of a writing course?

After all, it can be naïve to assume that “digital natives” instinctively jump for joy at the chance to compose with new media. As Beth Powell, Kara Poe Alexander, and Sonya Borton (2011) point out, “Learning new technologies can be frustrating for students who may view themselves as unskilled with technology, but it can be doubly frustrating for them to be required to use them in a composition course where they may assume that writing has nothing to do with technology or composing texts beyond the alphabetic.”

Or as J. Elizabeth Clark (2010) puts it, “Far from embracing digital rhetoric, many students reject it in favor of more comfortable essayistic literacy” (p. 32).

Even if students do jump for joy over a multimedia assignment, it doesn’t mean that they’re in for a cakewalk. According to Jennifer Sheppard (2009), “While multimedia technologies are

ubiquitous and many of our students already engage in development of personal projects, producing texts that integrate various modes and media in a meaningful, rhetorically purposeful way for a specified audience is a complex set of practices that takes time to develop” (p. 129).

Would I face a class of rowdy, disrespectful rebels like Sidney Poitier in *To Sir, With Love* (Clavell, 1967)? Or would students just be quietly annoyed—maybe bored? Even if camcorders were available for students to check out, would it cost anything? And how would I deal with the logistics of production? How would students actually put together their DVDs, since everything you save on a campus computer vanishes as soon as you log out? Would I have to ask students to pull all-nighters in the 24-hour computer lab in the library—to essentially make their videos in one marathon session? How professional would that be? Suddenly my original vision for the project wasn’t looking so great. As Debra Journet (2007) asked herself when she “invented herself in multimodality,” I too wondered, “How do I negotiate that sense of being unprepared as I try to move my inexpert self into the classroom?” (p. 111) With no programmatic culture of multimodal experimentation in place and with no institutional model of multimedia production in sight, I was full of insecurity. I started to wonder if I should beat a hasty retreat back to the comforts of the printed page.

As I was wallowing in ambivalence, I remembered that I had heard about a new employee whose job was to help faculty integrate technology into their teaching—a so-called distributed academic technology coordinator for Arts and Humanities. I figured he dealt mostly with things like Blackboard, but I decided to get in touch with him anyway.

Dave: We have a support model here at CU [University of Colorado at Boulder] that’s built around the idea of distributed assistance. Technology consultants work with faculty from various department-embedded positions around campus. If projects call for a more refined skill set or for the use of specialized equipment or facilities, the technology coordinators escalate the need to folks like me, who then follow through to make sure things go well.

Erik: The technology coordinator told me I should talk to Dave Underwood, who ran a new Media Lab over in Folsom Stadium, where the CU [University of Colorado at Boulder] football team plays. Walking there for the first time, I thought it was strange that there was a Media Lab tucked away on the third floor of the stadium. Who knew? As I snaked through the curiously silent corridors, I felt another surge of guilt about pursuing this project in a writing class. Was this really okay? Would it get me in trouble, the way I had been yelled at by an administrative assistant the time I tried to reserve a small auditorium on campus where my students could act out their reflective dialogues? The bizarrely isolated location of the Media Lab wasn’t exactly reassuring. It only added to my fear that I was pursuing something shady.

Dave: We tried to ignore Erik at first, but he was doggedly persistent. Besides, we had a room full of brand-new computers now, and a director who wanted results. This was, as it turns out, a serendipitous development.

One of the things that attracted us to working with Erik was that he had a pedagogic goal clearly etched in his mind—something concrete that he was after in this rather bold teaching

experiment. And, knowing that he had quite specific expectations for his students helped keep us comfortably grounded and on task.

Erik: Dave set me up with camcorders, tripods, and a portable hard drive to store the usability footage. He also gave students a quick tour of the Media Lab, including an overview of iMovie and iDVD. A colleague of his invited my students to conduct and film their usability tests on the Macs in his office. The tests were a little awkward, because, at times, two teams of students were filming at the same time within thirty feet of each other. Needless to say, the audio quality was less than ideal. But it was nice to see students doing this project for real clients they had chosen. Their clients included a piano bar, a Vietnamese restaurant in Denver owned by a student's family, a local fire-rescue organization, and a charity for a rare disease. That semester's DVDs were far from perfect, and my multimedia pedagogy, if you could even call it that, left much to be desired. Students pretty much just winged it and relied on Dave for help. But they pulled it off, and most of them seemed invested, even proud.

Dave: I have to admit it: Web usability tests were certainly not the sexiest introduction to working with multimedia projects. But the immediate triangulation of content made possible by videotaping and indexing user experiences was a powerful and undeniable way to show how people interacted with online materials.

Erik: Students wrote about the usability project in their reflective memos. Most of them said they liked the multimedia component. For example, they said it had motivated them:

- “While a bit unorthodox for a writing class, with regard to the DVD, I found this project a fun and exciting alternative to straightforward writing.”
- “The creation of the companion DVD made the project more interactive and fun. It drew us out of the realm of writing and into the multimedia world. It allowed students to be creative.”
- “I would have to say that this project has been one of the most educating and interesting projects in my college career.”

Students also said they liked the real-world nature of the project:

- “When we presented the DVD to the owners, they seemed thankful for the ability to hear what we had to say in a non-threatening manner.”

And students praised the Media Lab:

- “The tech staff was very helpful to our group, and we would not have been able to create such a good DVD without their support.”
- “I think one of the necessary tools for this project to run smoothly was the Media Lab. Most of us don't have access to that kind of equipment at home, and, in the rare chance that we do, we do not have a person willing to help us at our side.”

Students also offered some constructive criticism. They said the Media Lab could get too noisy and that they were frustrated by its limited hours. Many students shared one suggestion:

- “The class could have benefited from more lab time during class.”
- “We found ourselves scheduling a lot of time outside of class.”

As legitimate as this critique was, especially for a group project, the traditionalist in me still felt it was somehow wrong to waste class time in this way. Over time, I would see things differently.

Finally, students made another recommendation.

- “[. . .] during the course of the project I felt that if I would have known how to use the programs better, we would have done a much better job and would have been less dependent on Dave for help.”
- “I think future classes would benefit from more time and instruction from Mr. Underwood.”

As I read this mostly positive feedback, my blood pressure lowered rapidly. I especially liked the sound of “future classes,” which implied that this project—this collaboration between faculty and technical experts—would be worth doing again. Frankly, I didn’t know if such a thing was feasible. Would Dave want to get more involved in instruction? After all, as Richard Selfe (2004) points out, “[. . .] one of the fastest ways to get technicians to glaze over is to begin talking about instructional goals” (p. 16). And by the same token, he notes that “We can also watch our literacy colleagues glaze over once we start to talk about technology. This must change, and those of us who honestly believe in the computer-literacy linkage must help each group understand the exciting possibilities the other offers” (p. 16). Even if Dave was interested in working together again, we would probably need to tweak if not revamp our ragtag collaboration. And who knew if my bosses would catch wind of my multimedia experiment and stomp it out for good. In any case, I did feel my identity as a composition instructor start to change in a profound, positive way. Maybe I wasn’t such a freak after all. Maybe multimedia did have a legitimate role to play in a writing class. Now, whether I would be able to pursue this kind of project beyond the scope of a single class—and whether other faculty might follow suit—remained to be seen.

2. Convergence

Erik: Because the usability project had turned out so well overall, and because Dave had been so encouraging, I asked him if I could do the usability project again next semester in two sections of the same course.

Dave: Changing our phone number didn’t help; Erik found us anyway, and he said he’d like to bring his next batch of students into the lab for another project. The writing, it seemed, was on the wall: We were in this for real, which, as has since become abundantly clear, was a very

good thing. In ways that I've just recently begun to comprehend, those early collaborations with Erik shuttled my career onto an entirely new track. More on that later.

For now, let's just talk about how those first student-produced DVDs became the lynchpins for continued support, both from our director, and from other units and departments on campus. As unexciting as we thought those initial projects were, they represented a sea change in how labs worked with students and faculty, how students worked with technology, and how learning to communicate persuasively was about to change dramatically.

We were invited to give a little presentation to faculty from the Program for Writing and Rhetoric—Erik's group—and, well, Erik actually tells this better:

Erik: When Dave mentioned that he was going to give a presentation to the writing program and asked if he could show clips from my students' usability DVDs, I said yes but was secretly terrified. What if Dave's presentation amounted to an "exposé" of my rogue project, which I hadn't asked permission to do and which I hadn't told my colleagues about? As Michael Day (2009) has noted, "[. . .] without faculty buy-in (along with proper hardware, software, and faculty development support), any technology initiative is doomed to failure" (p. 4). In Day's case, he got chewed out by higher-ups "for using technologies 'that had nothing to do with teaching the students how to write'" (p. 4). He ended up leaving his university for friendlier academic waters. I felt grateful when Dave's presentation ended and I still had my job. In fact, a senior colleague expressed interest doing a web usability project for a new Technical Communication and Design course.

Relieved, I started to wonder if I might be able to design a multimedia assignment for another upper-division writing course I was going to teach next semester—Topics in Writing: Best American Essays. Already I planned to have students not only read but also write some pretty far-out essays that blended scholarly research and personal experience—what Candace Spigelman (2004) has called "personal academic writing." What if students translated one of these exploratory essays into multimedia form? I was excited by the prospect and was delighted when Dave shared my enthusiasm.

Each student ended up making a 5-minute multimedia version of their Reflective Analysis of a Personally Meaningful Place essay—an assignment that asks them to choose a meaningful place and, through a series of reflective writing exercises, develop an original, interesting idea of their own. Many of that semester's DVDs turned out to be crudely edited slideshows containing borrowed photos, borrowed music—sometimes awful music that was wrenchingly inappropriate for the occasion—and a voiceover. Students often focused too much on their individual experiences and not enough on their larger ideas. But some of the projects stood out and showcased the potential of more expressive multimedia in a writing class.

More importantly, the whole process of integrating multimedia into my teaching was getting a lot smoother. We were learning from our mistakes and noting our successes, and the quality of student work kept increasing. I say we because it became clear pretty quickly that Dave was a collaborator on many levels. I had gone into that first usability project assuming he would help me technically, and that's it. As it turned out, despite his modest assurances that he would never

interfere in matters of pedagogy, he was a born teacher and always had excellent ideas not only for planning projects but also for improving my assignments. I was grateful, and so were my students.

Dave: Remember when I said my career was profoundly affected by our work with Erik that first year? Here's how:

We saw immediately that Erik's students needed more than a clean, well-lighted place with iMacs and a cubby for their backpacks. They needed conditioning.

It was, in fact, apparent from the get-go: these kids, who could text three-hundred words per minute with their thumbs, were clueless when it came to working with things like audio tracks and video formats and pixels. And, even though they'd grown up with cathode-ray tans, they had absolutely no idea about how to tell a story with pictures and sound.

After helping the fifth or sixth student lab guest locate the proper folder in which to save captured voice-over tracks, we had a bit of an epiphany; what if we visited Erik's class at the beginning of an assignment and showed the entire group, en masse, how to launch and work with editing software?

Erik, not surprisingly, loved the idea, and my office-mate, Tim Riggs, and I soon found ourselves regularly visiting Erik's classes to demo things like iMovie and to show how digital video cameras work. This helped workflow in a number of ways. Students would now come to the lab with at least a good working knowledge of using the hardware and software required for completion of their projects. And Tim and I were now seen as friends of the class, if you will—two guys whose interests and responsibilities ran well beyond mere equipment. And the classroom visits gave us a chance to gauge and customize the scope of our support—a chance that stay-at-home lab staff would never get.

What wasn't to like about stepping across that gap between teaching and support? We realized that working directly with students, rather than being the boundary-enforcement nightmare we'd expected, was, indeed, exciting. They had great ideas. Some of their work, roughly produced as it was, gave us goose bumps. Other projects made us cry (and, no, I'm not referring to the Web usability studies).

We wanted to do more.

Erik: Dave's presence in the classroom, not just in the Media Lab, made a big difference. Who would have thought that such a minor infrastructural shift—walking across campus—would have such far-reaching pedagogical implications? Although Dave was ostensibly simply introducing students to “software,” he was in fact not only establishing a winsome ethos and calibrating students' comfort levels but also sneaking in expert mini-lessons about the rhetoric of multimedia. When he introduced transitions in iMovie, for example, he didn't just focus on logistics—“Click this, drag that.” He also asked students to think about why a particular transition might be fitting in one case but completely tacky in another.

I was beginning to see the extent to which Dave's background in graphic design could help my students compose with multimedia. Indeed, according to Joddy Murray (2009), "design is just another word for composition. All denotations and connotations aside, design is the act of putting together with intent, and that is exactly what students must do no matter if they are writing the most traditional type of academic essay, or if they are creating a poster for a local event" (p. 174). Dave and I may have come from very different disciplinary backgrounds—different domains—but we seemed to share a lot of common ground when it came to teaching multimedia. He had much more to offer than a technician.

It wasn't long before he unveiled his next idea, which took students' multimedia compositions to a new level.

Dave: It occurred to us that the next logical contribution we could make to helping Erik would be to develop some type of presentation that would help students dream bigger, better organize their thoughts, and work more efficiently in teams. We'd seen students shoot and re-shoot scenes, get halfway through the editing process only to find key media elements missing or impotent, or lose entire folders full of critical footage. It was a little heartbreaking, especially considering that they were so often on the track of a cool product.

Organization and vision were called for, and the solution, we felt, lay in storyboarding. This was the process the pros used to think and communicate visually. We put together an intro-to-storyboarding presentation that used Hollywood films to introduce students to film language and, to a greater extent, to the affordances of speaking through multimedia.

By the way, I'll admit here that I had a hidden agenda in developing the storyboard module: I wanted students to see *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954). I used scenes from the film to illustrate camera angles and dynamic lighting. All well and good, but I perversely had it in my mind that the children of *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) really needed to see the gun scene between Steiger and Brando. We all have our missions, don't we?

At the end of the storyboard talk, we included a very short deconstruction exercise in which we distilled a thirty-second "Trunk Monkey" commercial down to its most elemental working parts. What sound effects were used? What did the editors need to know about the voice-over? How did the camera frame the scene on the bridge, and how would the crew have set that up without a proper storyboard? That sort of thing. I think this helped students see the need for deep planning when embarking on a media project.

And from what I've heard from instructors, the storyboard has helped their students do better work, faster.

Erik: Although storyboards were an alien genre to me, I soon saw that they helped students move forward with their videos, much as invention exercises or outlines can help students move forward with traditional writing. And Dave's storyboard presentation proved to be more than a one-time gig. Especially for faculty with no background in storyboarding, his dynamic, detailed, and interactive talk proved an invaluable resource—a hallmark of his interactions not just with me but with faculty across campus who wanted their students to do multimedia

projects. Although it had nothing directly to do with computers or lab facilities, the storyboard talk, like our informal meetings before each semester to discuss not just the logistics but also the rationale for multimedia projects, became a key feature of the infrastructural framework that was taking shape.

Because Dave showed so much investment in my class projects and how to improve them, I felt inspired to follow suit. For example, I customized the way I asked students to work with storyboards. I didn't force students to follow them exactly, so they still had a lot of creative latitude in case they came up with a good idea or an interesting shot while filming. The storyboards became even more useful when I made students pitch them to their classmates and me, and then made them workshop and revise them. Before that, some students weren't taking the assignment seriously enough or weren't thinking specifically enough; the vagueness or implausibility of their storyboards rendered them almost useless. Yeah, that overhead shot of campus sounds nice, but how are you going to pull it off? And what exactly do you mean by "montage of images"? Those kinds of problems disappeared when students started to think of their storyboards as drafts—as works in progress that they would need to revise no less than their essays.

Sometimes students would pitch their storyboards to their classmates in small groups, while other times they would pitch them to the whole class, which added some pressure and probably increased their incentive to offer a compelling plan. Also, by grading their storyboards according to specific criteria that I included on the storyboard assignment sheet, I like to think I helped them think more rhetorically not only about the composition and editing of their shots but also about things that they might have otherwise been inclined to save for later like transitions and audio.

Dave: There's an interesting phenomenon I call The Many Faces of Chad, which might be worth noting here.

When Erik's students first came into the lab, they were often a bit unhappy with the assignment, and they let us know about it. This is the side of the student we get to see that I think is often hidden from the instructor's point of view. So the student—we'll call him Chad in this case—presents us with a cubist vision. In the classroom, Chad is sweetness and light. In the lab, though, he's sour and in a very dark mood.

"Why do I have to make a stupid movie in a writing class?" he hisses as iMovie tells him for the fourth time that his video capture will be letterboxed and that this may take a while.

We grin and bear it because we know that, in a few weeks, Chad will be telling us he's changing his major to Film Studies and that he wants extra copies of his project for Christmas stocking stuffers.

We've met a lot of Chads.

That's the thing about creating with multimedia, after all. The form allows students to at once fulfill the pedagogical requirements of the assignment and to entertain. They've been given

access to all the devices used in their favorite blockbusters, and when they see the power of a manic, high-energy soundtrack knitted closely to a crisply edited video segment, they become—well, seduced.

Erik: Sometimes students became a little too seduced—not so much by multimedia but by their own written words. For students’ multimedia essays, one big challenge was to cut their original essays into much shorter voiceover scripts. They had to determine which parts would best complement—but not compete with—the vision they had outlined in their storyboards. They killed many darlings in the process.

But sometimes not enough. Students would turn in their storyboards, with their voiceover (VO) scripts attached, along with the implicit assurance that they had read their VOs aloud and could fit them into their video without rushing. Sure enough, students would turn in multimedia essays in which they sounded like auctioneers.

[Sped-up voiceover: Do I hear essays? Do I hear multimedia essays? How fast can you talk? My students sure could talk fast. Maybe they were nervous. Maybe they just wanted to get it over with. But recording a voiceover isn’t like selling a cow. Sold!]

Here again I found it necessary to make students think of their voiceovers as works in progress. We started to listen to and analyze professional writers read their work online, and we started to workshop students’ voiceovers before they even got their hands on camcorders. The Media Lab’s five soundproof edit bays with USB mics helped make this process run pretty smoothly, and I was happy to schedule class time in the lab for students to record drafts of their voiceovers. We would workshop these voiceovers during our next class. Of course, most people hate the sound of their own voices, especially in front of a critical audience, but I think knowing that everyone felt the same way helped make the process less painful.

For years, I assigned a multimedia project in every course. It was great. Students in Writing on Science and Society made videos that debunked scientific myths, then posted them to YouTube to persuade a global audience. Students in First-Year Writing and Rhetoric created collaborative multimedia essays that examined the ethical, environmental, and health implications of their food choices. One semester in Technical Communication and Design, I got a service-learning course grant so the charities that students selected for their website usability projects could directly implement students’ recommendations. In assigning so many multimedia projects, I was taking to heart Cynthia Selfe’s (2004) conviction that “[. . .] if our profession continues to focus solely on teaching only alphabetic composition—either online or in print—we run the risk of making composition studies increasingly irrelevant to students engaging in contemporary practices of communicating” (p. 72).

Gradually, formative assessment in multimedia projects became as natural as formative assessment in writing. That includes drafts of students’ multimedia projects. Students always had specific grading criteria in advance, so they knew my expectations and had a basis for evaluating their drafts. Students would workshop their drafts in small groups, and we would watch and critique them as a whole class. Otherwise they would post them to the online service VoiceThread and get peer and instructor feedback in the form of text, audio, or webcam

comments. Gone were the days when I would cringe to spot a typo in a group's final web usability DVD and wonder if their recommendations would spiral down the client's toilet along with their ethos.

Often on the final day of the semester, students and I would watch the final projects in what felt like a mini-film festival. I always loved watching their final multimedia essays—the genre I assigned most often. Granted, the audience for these projects wasn't huge, but that didn't detract from their value. Students usually took pride in their work and often burned extra copies of their DVDs to share with their families. Whenever possible, Dave and Tim would join these screenings.

Dave: Since multimedia creations are so visceral, students, in some ways, re-defined themselves when they produce them. They become auteurs of a sort, and classroom presentations become true coming-out events. I've noticed this many, many times in attending final project presentations. There's an electricity in sharing one's video or poster with fellow students that simply doesn't seem to exist with its textual equivalent.

Erik: After watching students' final projects one semester, Dave responded to my request for feedback by e-mailing me three pages of notes, questions, and suggestions. In typical Dave fashion, he prefaced some of these insights with the line, "These thoughts are completely out of my domain; please don't think I'd presume to get under the hood of the course work. These questions just popped into my head as I watched the movies":

- "Could a student's project be highly impressionistic? Poetic?"
- "Some projects flirt w/ re-enactments (the near-shooting in Aurora essay, the Iraq War piece). Would a straight re-enactment with precious little VO meet the assignment's requirements?"

Dave was always making these kinds of observations, and they always made me think more deeply about my assignments and the creative, rhetorical opportunities I would offer students. What had begun as a jittery, dubious experiment turned into a model that enabled my students—and the students of a number of my colleagues in the writing program, as well as faculty across campus—to do more than just analyze and write about multimedia. It's worth reflecting a bit on the implications.

3. Resonance

Erik: I agree with Sondra Perl (2010) that "the use of new media is one of the most exciting developments to enter our field, a development that signals a paradigm shift in our ways of understanding and using composing in the classroom."

From my perspective, one advantage of the way things have turned out with the Media Lab and this new model of multimedia collaboration is that it happened so organically, from the ground up. Yes, the original Media Lab provided a space for students to work with multimedia. And yes, the university provided consultants for faculty interested in integrating technology into their teaching. But it didn't provide the spirit of true pedagogical collaboration—and the

willingness to experiment and innovate—that helped transform the Media Lab from an obscure, self-serve multimedia cave to a campus hub of interdisciplinary collaboration. At its heart, the model of multimedia pedagogy that prevails at CU-Boulder with projects that go through the Media Lab didn't emerge from curriculum committees, accreditation reviews, theoretical models, or institutional hierarchies. It emerged, as corny as it might sound, from a simple collaboration and a passion for teaching and learning—a desire to help students persuade audiences using all the available means of persuasion.

As Carrie S. Leverenz (2012) notes, “Although it's possible to instigate change by acting from the outside, the nature of those changes cannot be predicted or controlled since ultimately it is the collective of individual participants, responding to individual participants, responding to influences both outside and inside, that drives change” (p. 55).

Dave: Erik's right; the genesis for our collaboration was, in fact, organic and reactive. It should be remembered, though, that the Big Bang that kicked off our explorations was provided by my director at the time, who ushered me into his office one day and asked, in a roundabout way, if I had any plans for the future—a scary thing to hear from your boss. Up until this point my office had simply provided campus-wide support for the academic use of media. Jumping into lab management and, by extension, pedagogy, was a little unnerving. Serendipity brought us Erik and his students, though, and, from that point onward, the tracks were well defined, if somewhat meandering.

Erik: When I think about what it took for students to compose all of their multimedia projects, I think about much more than technology—camcorders, computers, editing software. I think about more than physical spaces—the Media Lab, the Mac classroom that I reserved for software training. Of course, these things are part of a necessary and important physical infrastructure, without which such projects would be impossible. But as Danielle Nicole DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey T. Grabill (2005) have argued, “[. . .] an infrastructure is more than material, is never static, and is always emerging” (p. 26). I think this insight reflects the evolution of the Media Lab—as a concept more than as a space. That is, the multimedia collaborations I was lucky to be involved in were always focused first and foremost on teaching and learning, and there was always an openness to try new things. Looking over some old e-mails from when Dave first told me that the Media Lab was moving from the stadium to a fancy new building called ATLAS (Alliance for Technology, Learning, and Society), I noticed that he originally wanted to call the lab the Chrysalis Lab.

Dave: I really did like the chrysalis name. Since then, though, I've started thinking more of the Serengeti than of the butterflies in my backyard. What I see now is our model serving as a watering hole—the one place on the academic plane where creatures of every stripe and shape come at least now and again for sustenance. In our case, of course, it's the turnkey approach to supporting the use of multimedia in the curriculum that is the life-giving water. And, because we sit at the intersection of so many different paths, our support and consultation activities have become deeply symbiotic.

Folks bring us ideas and philosophies, which we happily pass along to new arrivals, sparing them, in many cases, the discomfort of adding new technologies to their assignments without

solid guidance. Professor X, for instance, may have developed a highly effective grading rubric for a short-form informative video, which is now available at the watering hole for Professor Y, who is just now preparing to step from the shore for the very first time.

Working with Erik and other instructors like him brought us swiftly to this nexus, and I'm eternally thankful that the role of instructional support now involves much more than simply checking out cameras and upgrading software. In an era in which budgets are stretched to the max and students are expected to speak fluently in zeros and ones, the evolution from our traditional reactive and supporting role to one that is proactive and collaborative has allowed us to both efficiently scale our services and keep our sanity—mostly.

Erik: Of course, sustainable institutional models need to accommodate various disciplines and stakeholders. As Beth L. Brunk-Chavez and Shawn J. Miller (2009) point out, “Sustainability depends not only on the success of the early adopters, but also on the strength of the culture of use across campus” (p. 8). My work with Dave leads me to agree with Jason Palmeri (2012) that “[w]e may not be able to realize multimodal utopia, but we can work together in small ways to begin to change our pedagogies, our universities, and our social and political structures” (p. 161).

I've since left CU-Boulder, and right now I'm most excited about helping my composition students create old-fashioned, non-digital picture books for local children. But I still use many of the strategies I learned while working with Dave, including storyboarding.

And, thinking back, it dawns on me that maybe I never really was out of my domain after all. Or if I was, it wasn't anything to fear. Maybe thinking too much in terms of domains is part of the problem. For the sake of our students and their rhetorical futures, maybe more of us should step out—even completely out—of our domains.

Dave: My work with Erik has left me with a new job—one my supervisors have a rather difficult time categorizing. I suppose you could say I've become a general lecturer, but you would have to include coaching in there somewhere as well. In addition to my storyboard talk, I now give regular lectures—almost 60 each semester—on subjects like graphic design, typography, effective communication strategies, and designing great presentations. And, in each class I work with, I extend the invitation to students to contact me if they'd like assistance in getting their ideas whipped into shape. This coaching aspect of my job may now be the most rewarding part of what I do. In fact, I've gone evangelical—preaching the gospel of direct classroom involvement to others in my organization. What my group seems to miss is the excitement of teaching and the learning relationship. This isn't unique, I'm sure. Lots, if not most, university support groups too easily drift into the phone company way of thinking and doing things. Sure, they get very good at what they do, but without the excitement of the classroom, I'm afraid they too easily lose sight of what the university is all about. I think that matters. Meanwhile, back in the Media Lab, things have never been better. We feel fairly certain that at least one of our student guests is doing something clever, unique, and powerful. We can't wait to see how it comes out.

Sample Student Project #1

Multimedia Essay
By Joedy Hulings

Erik: At the end of the semester, I would hang out in the Media Lab and create “Greatest Hits” DVDs—compilations of the best student projects that students had given me permission to show to future classes. One of the projects that I still show students is Joedy Hulings’s wonderful, idea-driven multimedia essay “Transportation/Transformation.” Her project, based on her “meaningful place” essay, shows what you can do with a well-edited, well-paced, well-read voiceover, along with rhetorically deliberate uses of image and sound. Her multimedia essay also showcases the kind of student work made possible not simply by having a physical infrastructure in place to produce such work but also by having a pedagogical model that helps foster and refine such creativity.

[Joedy’s video. Voiceover not transcribed.]

Joedy: I thought that the process of writing my essay was really fun. I still had all these fresh memories and ideas from studying abroad, and this was my first chance to make them into something concrete. But then transforming my essay into the multimedia project was much more difficult. My full essay had included a story about a good friend who I met in Ghana, and how his experiences with trotros paralleled my own feelings about being in Ghana. When I started making my voiceover, I realized there was no way I could include that whole story and keep the project under five minutes. So now I had this new challenge to still get the same message across in my DVD, without including what I thought was a really powerful story. That’s the point where I realized I’d have to work really hard at picking the right pictures and tweaking the timing of the video and voiceover so that the overall DVD was even better than the essay itself, even while excluding this big component of the full essay.

I had never made any kind of multimedia project before, let alone used iMovie, so I found all of the introductory and training sessions very helpful. It also seemed like everyone involved was very open to our questions and very responsive to students, like me, who were doing all of these things for the first time.

I’m most proud of incorporating the video of the trotro station into my project. When I was going through all of my pictures from Ghana, and some pictures I had stolen from friends, I realized that while several of the pictures were good, I’m not a talented photographer and none of them seemed to capture my description of trotros. It was really exciting to remember this video footage my friend Will and I had taken and to see how well it fit into the message I was trying convey in my project. I actually love re-watching that part of the DVD because it feels real, like you’re walking along with our group friends to the next trotro.

I was a science kid in college, and now I’m a first-year medical student, so the majority of my college courses were, as you can probably imagine, fairly lacking in creative expression. So this project, as cheesy as it may sound, helped me recognize that I am capable of being creative, even artistic, and expressing my experiences through a medium that isn’t a lab notebook or a scientific paper. I really appreciate this opportunity. I still look back on this project as one of my proudest accomplishments as an undergraduate.

Sample Student Project #2 Collaborative Service-Learning Video

Dave: I've come to think that the service-learning assignment turbo-charges the learning process. I've seen it happen enough times now to believe that this isn't simply anecdotal. Students tend to do much better work when they know the work they do will live on beyond semester's end and that someone, somewhere, will actually benefit from their labors.

Erik: One of the best things about this model of collaboration is that it's so open to innovation. For example, in Fall 2009, while meeting with Dave and Tim at a local coffee shop to brainstorm multimedia projects for the next semester's courses, we came up with the idea to combine my growing interest in service learning with my continuing interest in students' more creative multimedia projects. I decided that students in my Best American Essays course would create multimedia essays for local nonprofits and charities. Then Dave tossed out an even more ambitious twist on the idea. What if, instead of creating small-group multimedia essays, students worked as a whole class on a single multimedia essay for a local community organization, with teams of students assuming the roles of film-industry professionals? It was an ambitious project, both logistically and pedagogically. The teams included producers and directors, scriptwriters, a film crew, an audio crew, a distribution and PR team, and an account rep and client liaison team. Dave even created a custom presentation on "The Business of Film" to introduce students to the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders.

Dave's "Business of Film" presentation helped students understand their roles in a compelling way. One class proposed and then voted to create their video for Rocky Mountain Riding Therapy, an organization devoted to providing affordable equine therapy to people with physical, learning, and mental disabilities. The client welcomed the video, which they posted both on their homepage and on YouTube.

[Rocky Mountain Riding Therapy video. Voiceover not transcribed.]

Erik: Although multimedia projects like this one may tempt some people to conclude, with J. Elizabeth Clark (2010), that "[i]n our nascent digital culture, the traditional essayistic literacy that still dominates composition classes is outmoded and needs to be replaced by an intentional pedagogy of digital rhetoric that emphasizes the civic importance of education [. . .]" (p. 28), I actually share Marilynne Boyle-Baise's (2007) faith in "a pluralistic view of service, as a pedagogy that can be enacted in diverse contexts in various ways and for different reasons" (p.28). QA: What is the correct page number? The page numbers for this reference run from 67-85. As Linda Adler-Kassner (2000) points out, "Service learning courses come in all shapes and sizes" (p. 28). I do consider it a blessing when faculty and students have the resources and support necessary to see multimedia service-learning projects like this come to fruition.