ENGL 272 ~ Introduction to Technical Communication

Burnside provides an overview of how she developed a sequence of assignments using the multimodal composing principles for a Technical Writing sequence (this can be found here. (length 5:47)

> The Introduction to Technical Writing course that I teach using Writer/Designer as an aspect of that is actually a 200 level, second writing requirement course. It has a variety of students from all different majors that are in there for a lot of different reasons: Environmental Safety Health and Wellness, Pharmacy, there are a lot of people from sometimes Criminal Justice, Psychology. It is kind of just a hodge-podge of different students. Trying to find an approach to teach the different genres within technical writing and still meet the different interests of these students is kind of interesting. So how I do it is that individually they each write a problem report that is on a specific topic, reports a balanced view on a non-polemical topic that they can investigate. Then the students post those to a public discussion board and read reports from classmates. After which they email me the top three topics they would be interested in continuing forward with. Then I divide them into groups based on their interests and I also try to spread out – earlier in the semester I get a survey of their technological skills – I try to spread out people throughout the group so it's not all techie people in one group and all non techie people in another.

> Then students move forward, they investigate the problem a little bit more. They think about the public service announcement, what genre that is, who they might want to target, and create a proposal based on their planning documents after considering the rhetorical situation. During this process we are reading Writer/Designer about multimodal composing, we're reading about design choices and that theory as we move through this. Then after that they do an audience analysis for the actual media text. They get the choice between a minimum 30 second video clip – maximum 60 seconds, three 10 second audio clips – maximum 60 seconds collectively, or a poster-flyer-pamphlet sequence. So in the proposal stage we really talk about why you would choose one genre over the other, who the target audience is, where are they most likely to encounter the message – all of those considerations that really make Writer/Designer great about having the rhetorical aspects of what you are designing also drive how you decide to deliver the message. I think that is one thing that the book does really well.

> Then students create a draft and we do a peer review of the media text draft. Because I teach several sections I actually create a peer review wiki and they get to review groups from other classes. Combining the sections allows students to see more drafts and get different ideas from peers in other classes. Through the wiki they use a SurveyMonkey link to complete the peer review. Students are not required to review their own draft, but I do point out that this would be an anonymous way to give feedback if they feel their voice is not being heard in the group meetings.

> The feedback comes back to me, I compile it and pass it along. This requires the students to practice interpreting different types of graphs and tables – a useful technical writing skill as well. When we begin the revision discussion and talk about how this is their document.

My feedback is anonymously included in the survey, so they do not know which comment is mine and which is that of their classmates. I find this allows the revision process to be more authentic – when they are not trying to simply address my comments and ignoring others. I emphasize students have the final decision on what advice they want to listen to – looking for general trends – or what to ignore – outliers that do not have specific support for the critique.

Because group work can be an issue there are a few documents throughout the sequence that allow individuals to anonymously report on the function of the group and perceptions of individual effort. This allows me to try to address any major issues before it becomes detrimental to the group or a group member's grade.

Students move forward and continue the project by creating a set of instructions. They have the option to either teach a specific group how to use their PSA materials or teach a specific group how to create a social media campaign on the topic using their PSA materials. This is another multimodal piece that students have to make design decisions about and by this time I get to see that they are actually understanding how the rhetorical situation of who will use the instructions and how placement of images within the document will affect usability of smaller portions of a larger project.

This is an ongoing project where they create drafts of all of these documents but the final is not assessed until the end of the semester. At this point they are also starting to gather a web portfolio which must include a revised version of the original problem report, a revised version of the PSA media text, and a revised version of the instructions. We go through and examine each piece – what does the revised version need to have, what does that look like? What will each piece include on the portfolio, and then at the end they do a group presentation together to explain the decision making process and how they evaluated draft feedback and chose to make or not make revisions. They close by individually providing a project evaluation memo to reflect on how the process worked for them and what they learned about basic technical writing issues – working as a team, drafting and usability testing, project management, etc.

This sequence takes nine to ten weeks of the semester but it is really worth it. It requires students to encounter all of the forms based technical writing requirements, but also allows them to apply a more rhetorically reactive, more critical thinking focused approach that I think is encouraged by Writer/Designer. This allows them to really bring out the decision making process along the way.