

# *Computer Writing and Research Lab*

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## *Creating an Annotated Syllabus for Job Searches and Teaching Portfolios*

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*Abstract:* This whitepaper outlines a model for creating an annotated syllabus that highlights the theoretical and institutional contexts for a given course, as well as the instructor's critical reflections. The whitepaper examines some possible sections for including in the annotated syllabus, which can be used as part of a professional development or teaching portfolio.

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It *will* happen. One day you will find yourself in front of a hiring committee who wants to talk about your teaching. Good news! You've taught in the CWRL, created an interesting RHE 309 course, and styled some terrific projects for students. But how can you showcase all of these assets in an efficient and powerful way? One answer is in the annotated syllabus. Modeled on the "Course Designs" section of the journal *Composition Studies*, the annotated syllabus offers an effective way to put your teaching, pedagogy, and theory into a series of professional contexts. While there is nothing magic about this format, there are some good reasons you might want to include some of the following categories into a teaching statement or online portfolio.

The annotated syllabus I sketch below is divided into four sections: course descriptions, institutional context, theoretical rationale, and critical reflection. The rhetorical tone of each section can be altered for your different audiences, or they can serve as a general example for your teaching philosophy. Before outlining a sample annotated syllabus of my RHE 309L course, I briefly explore the purpose behind each of these four sections:

- *The course description:* This section offers readers all the facts about your course. What students take this course? What are the main proj-

ects?

- *The institutional context:* In this section, you can demonstrate how this course fits the needs of your specific university and community contexts. Remember that students in your classes are somewhat different from students in another university context. This is the section in which you can identify the needs of students at your university, showing how this class helps to meet some of those needs. Not only does this reflect your ability to think rhetorically and critically about your own pedagogy, but it also provides an opening for talking about how you would modify this course (or others like it) within different institutional or community contexts.

- *The theoretical rationale:* This section provides the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of your pedagogy, as exemplified in this particular course. Here is a perfect place to position yourself as a scholar by demonstrating that you are aware of various conversations and issues happening within your field of study. This is the part of the annotated syllabus that tells your audience: “I’ve done my homework, done my reading, and this is why I teach the way I do.” Moreover, you can show off as a wo/man of many talents in this section. If I continued to revise my annotated syllabus below, for instance, I could easily add some additional comments about how teaching in the CWRL has helped me to pursue this goal of “engagement” that I mention. This is your chance to show that you are not a one trick pony. Not only have you done your homework in your “home field,” but you are also a teacher-of/with-technology. Bring the strands together in the theoretical rationale.

- *Critical reflection:* Here is the place where you can be honest and reflective about the class. Why is this class important to talk about? Given everything you said above, how well did this class actually fulfill those goals and needs you mentioned? This section can also provide an opportunity to look toward the future in *other* classes. You can also discuss what did not work so well in the course and why; critical self-reflection is a worthy attribute in job candidates. In my sample syllabus below, I included some short descriptions of student projects, though I don’t necessarily think this is essential. To borrow a phrase that many of us ask our students, the critical reflection section is your place to answer the “So what?” question.

- *Additional sections:* In a teaching portfolio, you will want to include your syllabus with weekly assignments and readings. If you are putting your annotated syllabus online, it might also be a good strategy to include screen shots of some student work (if you plan to highlight

your CWRL work with technology).

## *Annotated Syllabus for Rhetoric 309L: The Writing Process*

### *1. Course Description*

Rhetoric 309L, *The Writing Process: Documenting Austin*, is designed as a lower-division writing course that addresses aspects of the writing process at The University of Texas at Austin. Students who take the course are usually fulfilling a writing requirement of nine-hours of writing-intensive coursework. This particular version of Rhetoric 309L is a workshop course designed for the practice of improving student prose through the writing process. However, we define “writing” very broadly in this course, rather than over-emphasizing the essay format. In fact, students write in many kinds of genres and media, exploring how different kinds of writing accomplish different rhetorical goals.

Whereas many lower-division composition courses typically focus on the writing process through a series of short essays, students in Rhetoric 309L concentrate on one single project throughout the semester: a documentary. These individual student documentaries address any local phenomenon, issue, place, object, idea, or event that students choose. The documentary must be something students are able to treat and document first hand and in-depth, using primary research. The topic must also be focused enough that students can treat it with close attention in a relatively short documentary. Although the term documentary conjures up Frontline style video, these documentaries can be created in various media. The class is taught in a computer classroom, which allows students to create their documentary projects in a variety of media, including web-based, audio-based, text-based, or video-based media. Because Rhetoric 309L focuses on the writing process, we spend a great amount of time thinking about how writing involves the recursive practices of thinking, writing, revision, and learning how to get (and use) feedback from others. After the stages of researching and storyboarding, the class uses a workshop format in order to critically respond as a group to students’ individual drafts.

### *2. Institutional and Community Context*

My version of Rhetoric 309L, designed around the creation of individual documentary projects, serves several different needs for students at The University of Texas. First, there is a strong institutional need for a course that makes writing its main focus. The University of Texas at Austin is a campus of over 55,000 students, which means that many courses are large, lecture-based classes that feature little writing

throughout the semester. Even when students are assigned essays and other forms of writing, instructors often do not have the time to give feedback or comments on drafts. Therefore, a course like “The Writing Process” marks a unique opportunity for students to receive a great deal of attention to their writing. This course emphasizes the recursive roles that invention, revision, critique, and research play in the writing process. Students also learn how to critically respond to others’ writing in our workshop setting. We discuss the fact that writing is not an isolated activity but a collaborative and rhetorical one. Because students workshop drafts of their projects, listening to and reading feedback from their classmates, they begin to understand that their own texts are inter/active within the context of our classroom community.

In a larger academic and community context, moreover, Rhetoric 309L encourages students to see their own everyday experiences as material for reflection. The mission of the University aims for the “advancement of society through research, creative activity, scholarly inquiry and the development of new knowledge,” yet undergraduate students often fail to see themselves as researchers who are joining a scholarly community. Paradoxically, this reluctance is partly born out of our students’ earlier academic success. Students at UT boast high SAT scores and excellent high school rankings (nearly 70% of entering freshmen for 2003-2004 were in the top tenth of their class). However, these same students have fallen prey to what some education scholars have dubbed a “culture of testing,” where knowledge is seen as extrinsic to the student, held by autonomous experts, and inherently testable. My students have become accustomed to writing essays that draw heavily from secondary research, reporting what others have already said about their chosen topic. In order to encourage students to see themselves as potential contributors to scholarly conversations, however, Rhetoric 309L emphasizes students’ ability to conduct primary research: collecting, editing, and commenting on the materials from the world around them.

### 3. *Theoretical Rationale*

In their much-cited *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfactuals*, Bartholomae and Petrosky outline some premises for their writing course at The University of Pittsburgh. As they explain in their introduction to the course outline, it is not so much that undergraduate writers sometimes encounter trouble because they are poor writers as much as they are weak readers who fail to carve a meaning for their own purposes. Yet Bartholomae and Petrosky’s pedagogy does not teach students how to “read” better by finding the controlling idea of a text. Instead, they want to teach students how to “make the *presentation* of meaning possible, a process that is at once an individual’s concession to the

beliefs of the community and an assertion of his own vision of possibility, of territorial rights.”<sup>1</sup> “Good” writers, in other words, are those who have learned how to make their encounters with the texts count.

For Bartholomae and Petrosky, such a pedagogy involves asking students to read texts for moments that they found significant, important, interesting: “The story that undergirds our course, then, has a necessarily simple structure. It has a reader noticing something and then accounting for the significance of what he read. What is it that a reader notices? . . . [I]t could be anything. . . : an event, a phrase, a moment of confusion. . .”<sup>2</sup> From this point, students are then asked “to find a way of using those moments to talk about a text’s meaning.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, students assign a significance to those initial “noticings” that they experienced while reading. Less advanced writers are not less knowledgeable than developed writers, according to Bartholomae and Petrosky, but they are instead “powerless. . . to do something with what they read.”<sup>4</sup> The problem, according to Bartholomae and Petrosky, is that student writers often fail to see the text as text, instead “hearing” it like a truthful conversation that must be retold. Our students too often do not see a text as something that can be used in new ways for meaning-making.

Like Bartholomae and Petrosky, I wanted to create a writing pedagogy that might teach students to think in terms of encounters—how to choose, pursue, and engage in those encounters that allow for the least amounts of limitations in thinking and invention. The *pedagogy of noticing* that Bartholomae and Petrosky make initial gestures toward actually raises the issue of encounters with texts; it asks students to reconceptualize the text as a force that encounters the forces of our own everyday experiences. I argue that to teach writing grounded in rhetoric is thus to teach in terms of engagement. It is to teach the connections of everyday life, place, and official discourse. That is, if the goal of teaching rhetoric and writing is to teach *engagement with the world*, then our pedagogies *should* actually engage with the world.

#### 4. *Critical Reflection*

Although documentaries have the advantage of sounding remarkably exciting to students, at least in comparison to traditional essays, the heart of this course does not lie in the flashy finished products. Instead, our main focus is on *research*. Whereas research is often considered by students (and even some teachers) as a process *leading* to public production (a means to an end, so to speak), the heart of our class involved a logic of generative research that takes *research* as an aim. Using individual blogs, students collect their research by writing weekly entries on their “finds.” These informal entries address the writers’ observa-

<sup>1</sup> David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts: Theory and Method for a Reading and Writing Course* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1986) 11.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

tions about the environments around them. After several weeks of collecting research, students come to form a topic for their documentary. We begin to talk about how they will approach this topic from the situated position of a documentarian. This is where the student writer begins to draw from her role as rhetorician. In short, I ask students, what will you do with your pieces of observations—your finds, your research? Later, students will storyboard the project, drawing from the research they have collected, and then create their documentary.

What is perhaps most unique about the projects in Rhetoric 309L is that research is conducted as a kind of engagement. In other words, writing is conducted as if students' material location and situated context matters in their search for access to official discourses. The result is a writing that can be difficult, amazing, rewarding, less-than-spectacular, or even off-the-mark. But the projects are consistently depend on the student writer as the primary "expert" who generates the research and the critical perspectives upon that research. And this, to me, is a pedagogical access worth pursuing. Two student projects, created by Jon Li and Tara Hawthorne, offer an example of such engaged research.

Jon created an interactive CD-ROM that addressed Asian gangs in a southeast area of Houston called Scarsdale, where Jon grew up. Although many of the students at UT come from Houston, Jon was surprised that his fellow students knew very little about Scarsdale's Asian life. As a first-year student at UT, a relatively homogenous campus, Jon was also affected by the stereotypes about Asian-American males being "brainy," "weak," and even "effeminate." Rather than simply creating a project that "informed" readers about Scarsdale's gangs, therefore, Jon also took these *local campus experiences* into consideration. The result was complex, keeping local experiences of Asian-Americans in Austin in "joint tenancy" with research about Scarsdale.

In a different mode, Tara created a film documentary about full-time students at UT who work more than 30 hours per week. Tara followed the lives of three female students, allowing their own words to make the argument that Tara felt so passionately: there is a tiered system of education for workers and non-workers. Through workshopped viewings of the documentary, Tara soon realized that her original argument was missing the mark. Non-working UT students (who tend to be relatively upper-middle-class) tended to express sympathy and articulate the trope that "working students have it hard"—all without blinking an eye. But sympathy wasn't what Tara wanted. In revisions, she went one step further in order to provoke her audience by explicitly arguing that working students should receive extra time for school projects, occasional extensions, and special extra-credit possibilities.

While Rhetoric 309L does not necessarily help to create "perfect writers" who can turn out expert prose after our fifteen-week course,

it does help to make some dents in students' perceptions about scholarship and expertise. Moreover, the course also places research within a creative and social context. Rather than thinking only in terms of audience, purpose, clarity, and information, therefore, the logic of this course's documentary projects focuses on interactions within our local ecologies. Bringing this logic into the realm of our own rhetorical pedagogy, we are reminded that rhetorically-grounded education can mean something more than learning how to decode elements, analyze texts, and reciting that seem to exist autonomously and acontextually. Our pedagogies can also engage processes and encounters. Not "learning by doing," but "*thinking* by doing." Or, better yet, *thinking/doing*—with a razor thin slash mark barely keeping the two terms from bleeding into each other. This is a rethinking of the "in order to later" model, where students learn methods, skills, and research *in order to later* produce at other sites (other sites in the university or workplace, for example). This one-way flow can be radically revised in everyday settings, where social ecologies are already in practice. As Rosa Eberly puts it, "[r]hetoric matters because rhetoric—*which demands engagement with the living*—is the process through which texts are not only produced but also understood to matter."<sup>5</sup> When we approach a pedagogy that does indeed engage with the living, hooking into the processes that are already in play, then we find ourselves engaging in a writing pedagogy whose power is not circumscribed or delimited.

<sup>5</sup> Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana, IL : University of Illinois Press, 2000) 296, my emphasis.