Generating an Online Collaborative Ethnography Option  
for the First Year Writing program

a 2011 Tech Fellows Final Report  
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RECAP OF PROJECT RATIONALE and GOALS

The Summer/Fall 2011 semester was spent developing and implementing an enhanced ethnography curriculum, Fieldworkers’ Commons, for the First Year Writing Program’s Writing & Rhetoric II course. The new syllabus was based upon a template developed by Brianne Bolin in her individual WRII sections over the past few years. The overarching goal was to construct online resources for First Year Writing instructors that encourage shared authorship between students and their communities, both at Columbia and around the Chicagoland area. Specific goals included the development of a Moodle database of peer-to-peer platforms and open source software to encourage First Year Writing instructors to promote community collaboration via online and digital tools; to develop meaningful partnerships with with other departments and encourage interdepartmental collaborations among students; to give students the opportunity to create works with civic value; and to develop and curate an online space for public, permanent exhibition of student ethnographers’ work.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Our course had two online hubs, Moodle and Fieldworkers’ Commons. We thought of them as the gallery and the studio, as Fieldworkers’ Commons was the white-walled gallery where their revised work was made public for their respective communities (see above), and Moodle was the somewhat messier work space where students chose their metaphorical tools - readings, assignment prompts, course news and campus events - and uploaded their drafts for peer and instructor comments (see below). As in the art
world, the students spent the majority of their semester in the “studio;” the gallery becoming important only at the end of the semester once the bulk of their work was complete.

CHALLENGES

Interdepartmental Collaboration
The expectation set forth in our original proposal and the syllabus for the course was that students would work both with each other and with students outside of the class in other disciplines to complete several steps of the ethnography. We encountered challenges, even before the semester began, in trying to set up a framework for interdisciplinary collaboration by linking up with courses in other departments. It proved difficult to insert our course projects into the framework of existing syllabi. Over the course of the semester, students were reluctant to collaborate with other student artists even within their sections, and there were very few instances of collaboration with students in other disciplines.

One notable exception was the Field Notes #3 Oral History assignment, which very successfully nudged students to create aural and video works that combined their own and their peers’ voices. Two of the most successful collaborations were oral histories on the Gene Siskel Film Center and the Columbia Film/Video Department Equipment Cage.

Scope of Ethnographic Survey
At the onset, we planned to restrict students to ethnographic sub communities of Columbia College Chicago. The rationale was to actively engage the largely first-year population with their new community
and to create a dynamic record cultivated through student voices for the College’s archive.

Many students struggled with identifying a subculture that held meaning for them within the restricted scope. Anecdotally, this may be due to the fact that as first-year students, they felt both unfamiliar with and uncomfortable in their new environment. In more than a few cases, this, combined with the limited time frame within which to choose a topic, created a sense of panic in the student. In both of our sections, we opted to widen the scope for those students who felt unduly encumbered by limitation.

**SUCCESES**

**An Unconventional Text**
Scott McCloud’s text *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* was chosen as the main text for the course for its unconventional (for a writing and rhetoric class) exploration of narrative. Students responded overwhelmingly positively to selections from the text, and were noticeably more engaged with the readings than in sections we have taught using more conventional texts for the course.

**A Interdisciplinary Approach**
Although students rejected the opportunity to work with artists from other fields, they often took it upon themselves to create narrative through multiple modes, particularly by pairing text and image. We feel this was encouraged both by the text and by examples of past student work that was shared with students throughout the semester. The most successful students tied their work on the ethnography into their work in their major - for example, Film/Video majors adapting their text as narration for mini-documentaries or Art/Design students creating their own mini graphic novels to convey the observations from their site field notes. Almost to a person, the students embraced the invitation to pair photographs with their texts - an expectation set forth in the first assignment of the course, which asks students to brainstorm for a text based cultural autobiography using meaningful images from their personal histories. Being able to share photos from their lives with the class also served as a great ice breaker for the class, and fostered more open, comfortable and meaningful in-class critiques and peer reviews.

Overall, the expectation that students think beyond the written word felt appropriate and very “Columbia.” Students responded to it well, and in many cases took it as an opportunity to create “real work” where there might have been only an “assignment.”

**A Paperless Class**
A late breaking goal of the project was to extend the focus on online and digital tools to the use of Google Docs for drafting and grading purposes. This worked extremely well. Using Google Docs in a draft-based course fostered clarity and speed of response and saved an amazing amount of paper over the course of the semester. Working with paper, students would once wait several days for feedback on drafts. But with Google Docs, feedback and suggestions for revisions are available in real time. On an administrative level, Google Docs also eliminated any confusion regarding when assignments were turned in and whether revisions had been made and when.

The collaborative atmosphere made possible through Google Docs was an unexpected success. Students were also able to easily share drafts with classmates for peer review, and all feedback was kept in the comments streams, easily accessible for future revisions. Our students learned to practice and engage with collaborative writing, which strengthened both the authors’ and the critics’ voices. When paired with Moodle, this tool prompted a class-wide commitment to revision, careful craft, and conscientious editing. It also helped students realize the potentials of writing, learning, and participating in a collective, an empowering tool of the Internet (our contemporary commons) that many had not not yet harnessed for their own purposes.
Students became extremely comfortable with workshopping directly within Google Docs, and requested to use class time to engage in this method of critique several times throughout the semester. This worked especially well for the quieter classes, who preferred to communicate via the written word and tended to be reserved in traditional workshop formats. You may view a classwide critique of a first draft for Field Notes 2: Routines, Rituals, and Rites here.

Early in the semester, students were asked to respond to “Collaborative Learning in the Digital Age,” an article by Cathy N. Davidson in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and consider whether their previous classroom experiences were situated within the 20th (assembly-line method) or the 21st (learning collectives) century modes of education. Students became exhilarated with the idea that they could evaluate each other’s work and become co-authors of projects and, potentially, their courses; these 21st century methods were made most evident through the co-authorship made possible by Google Docs.

ASSessment AND survey DATA
Working with the Office of Research, Evaluation and Planning and an Academic Research Analyst, we created a survey tool to measure outcomes. Areas of interest included typical levels of student collaboration, students’ online habits (using the Internet socially or superficially vs. as a vehicle for meaningful research or collective creation), and students’ comfort level with online technologies (including Google docs, Google maps, Voicethread, Flikr, Moodle, and things like Audacity and Garage Band) both pre- and post-course. All five sections of WRRII were included in the survey, and the results of our three most technologically important facets - use of the web for meaningful research, creation, and collaboration, are detailed below.

Use of Web for Creation
At the outset of the course, we intended to assist students in harnessing the web for creative rather than consumptive purposes, abetting their transformation from consumers to producers of electronic content. We were pleased to see the remarkable shift in this area from Week 1 to Week 15.
Use of Web for Collaboration
Another important measure of our success within the course was charting whether or not students began using the possibilities of the web for collaboration. The results of the survey varied across the board, but classroom experience told the story of an exponential increase in collaborating with others to produce texts.
Use of Web for Meaningful Research
While two courses saw a decline in the number of students performing daily online research, three classes saw an increase. From classroom experience, we were pleased to see students performing more searches on the library database than Google at the end of the semester, so we feel that students had successfully implemented this habit into their studies.
LONG TERM IMPLEMENTATION

Long term expectations for this initiative are ambitious. We hope that the initiative will provide a fresh option for First Year Writing faculty that partners them and their students with other constituencies, both internal and external to the college. We will continue our work into the future, and hopefully mobilize communities and instructors to participate in our experiment.
Jill's Plans for Spring 2012
Plans for Spring will be altered somewhat based on both assessment results and the class experience in Fall. The most successful elements of our pilot will be carried over - first and foremost, using Google Docs as the main venue to share work both faculty-to-student and student-to-student. I will also keep *Understanding Comics* as the main text and continue to present the expectation that students think of storytelling in multi-disciplinary terms. I will not continue to restrict the scope of the ethnography to an on-campus subculture; however, I will continue to ask that students consider their place within the Columbia community as they work to identify and strengthen their voice. I will definitely keep the expectations that students use online technologies available to them as they determine the best and most appropriate ways to tell their stories. I will also revamp the Wiki approach to the annotated bibliography and ask that students create a more holistic web presence for their site, rather than merely an online exploration of outside sources. I will of course, continue to depend on Moodle as online portal and collection site for work, as well as Facebook as venue for more general communication and image sharing.

Brianne’s Plans for Spring 2012
My Spring 2012 Writing & Rhetoric course will be an ethnographic inquiry course thematically linked to this year’s Critical Encounters: Rights, Radicals & Revolutions. This provides me with an excellent opportunity to instill the spirit of a learning collective into my classroom, as well as provide multiple opportunities for my students to collaborate to create a classwide project that incorporates their unique talents - cinematography, journalism, creative writing, organizational tactics, and anything else they bring to the table. Like Jill, I will continue encouraging my students to think in multi-disciplinary terms. And as for Google Docs, now that I’ve gone paperless, there’s no going back. I will keep working to present the Internet as a simple, practical way to collaborate with learning communities to share and construct meaningful projects.