

Multimedia Undergraduate Research in Composition

Hannah Bellwoar, Jill Palmer, and Fisher Stroud

Juniata College

At Juniata, a small liberal arts college, faculty and students have a lot of freedom in what forms their research can take. Jill and Fisher are seniors at Juniata, both working on multimedia research projects; Hannah is their faculty mentor and a faculty member in professional writing and integrated media arts. We believe that in the field of composition, faculty mentors should be encouraging students and providing research experiences with similar freedom so students can work in multimedia forms and address audiences that are relevant to them.

Hannah: Mentoring Creative, Multimedia Undergraduate Research

As a graduate student in the early 2000s, my faculty mentors Gail Hawisher and Paul Prior provided opportunities for creative, multimedia research in my writing studies classes. We read Joyce Walker's "Textural Textuality," a nonlinear piece of digital scholarship; we made our scholarship into multimedia forms such as websites, collages, cookies, and 3D objects; and we embodied the digital and cultural-historic activity theory scholarship with which we engaged. Making multimedia scholarship energized and engaged me; as I played with theory, I began to understand and feel it, as Jody Shipka puts it, developing rhetorical and material awareness. I've continued to write and publish multimedia and digitally-born scholarship since then.

As I was finishing my degree in 2010, Cheryl Ball was making her tenure case, arguing for "scholarship that uses appropriate, multiple media—writing, audio, video, graphics, coding, etc.—to enact its argument and typically cannot be printed and retain its meaning." I thought to myself: why isn't the multimedia scholarship that I produce as highly valued as print scholarship, when it has such an important impact on me and the audiences I want to reach? When I got my job at Juniata and started mentoring undergraduate research in writing studies, it was never a question of whether I would provide my students opportunities to work in multiple media to develop rhetorical and material awareness and to impact and engage the audiences important to them.

What I didn't realize was the tremendous reciprocity involved in mentoring undergraduate research. Through this work, I've continued to refine my teaching, encouraging students to do multimedia research in my classes and expand those projects into their senior research.

Jill: Combining Writing and Digital Media

When I began my college experience as a freshman, I assumed that my final project would be a paper of some kind. However, I became interested in multimedia because of different classes, such as Video Production Writing, Intro to Professional Writing, and Visual Literacy. These classes helped me realize the other ways that I could manifest my research to reflect the writing and digital media parts of my major. Because I studied both writing and digital media during my college career, I felt that the best way to display what I had learned over my time as a student was by creating text-based, interactive, fictional game. In my game, the player takes on the role of the first human engineer on board Starship Lunus, a largely Martian organization located somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy. The purpose of this game is to bring attention to workplace discrimination through a workforce simulation experience. This research project gave me the opportunity to explore nonlinear storytelling techniques through constructing a narrative with multiple endings. This melding of my dual passions makes my project unique because I force my audience to engage in multiple different ways. Part of my project involved presenting my research to a class of sophomore English students so that they could begin to imagine what their own final senior projects could be. By choosing a nontraditional senior thesis and sharing it with others, I am altering other students' perceptions of what a professional writing senior thesis could.

Fisher: Putting Research into a Representational Medium

I have spent most of my degree studying Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase: "The medium is the message." And I find my research experience differed from those of my peers, because I had to demonstrate what I had learned about media in a much more abstract way. When I began my degree, I wasn't aware that I was going to be able to create a multimedia project as undergraduate research; as soon as I saw that opportunity, however, I knew that it was the perfect choice for me. Being able to realize that research by creating a short film that examines the limits and constraints of the medium seems like the most appropriate way to culminate my degree.

The opportunity to do undergraduate research has been such an educational experience for me, and I also appreciate the opportunity to invite others to participate in that research. Being able to collaborate with my peers as cast and crew and giving them the opportunity to gain experience working on a student film is really valuable to me. I know how valuable that experience is because it's the same way that I learned about the opportunity to work on a multimedia project, through working on my peers' films over the past three years.

Conclusion

We believe that multimedia research doesn't have to be a difficult process, though it could seem difficult for mentors and undergraduate students at first—especially if it is something they are not as used to. Each of us incorporated our interests and took on new challenges with multimedia research. We recommend that undergraduate students take advantage of opportunities for multimedia research as early as possible in their undergraduate coursework. We urge students to talk to their professors about their interests and not to be discouraged at the possibility of doing multimedia research because it seems difficult. We had preconceived notions about what is allowed in academia, but we've learned that composition scholars do multimedia research and that some scholarly endeavors can more fully represent the research through multimedia means. We believe in the deep engagement provided when students are free to combine their interests with their coursework and pursue research in multiple media to reach the audiences that matter to them.

Works Cited

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