Implementing 21st Century Literacies in First-Year Composition

Maggie Gordon Froehlich and Peter Alan Froehlich

New Voices

This case study of the authors’ process of curricular innovation, assessment, and redesign provides guidance to colleagues seeking to implement 21st century literacies into their own objectives for first-year composition courses.

In a 2003 essay, Mary E. Hocks claimed that digital technology and the Internet “require new definitions of what we consider writing,” which, in turn, require “changes in our understanding of writing and rhetoric and, ultimately, in our writing pedagogy” (630–31). In November 2008, the National Council of Teachers of English published “The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies” (21CL); its objectives include using technology, producing and analyzing multimedia texts, accessing and evaluating complex research sources, building relationships to enable collaboration, considering the diversity of a global Internet audience, and attending to the ethical considerations involved in each of these activities. As part of what Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker call an “early majority”—that group whose adoption of new practices proceeds slowly, following established precedent—we began to incorporate the objectives in the NCTE Statement into the design of our first-year composition (FYC) courses in 2009. In what follows, we provide a case study of two iterations of our course to encourage colleagues to consider implementing 21CL into their own FYC courses, while also providing fair warning of the challenges involved. Such consideration begins with two broad questions: Should I do this? and Can I do this?

Should I Do This?

Before committing to a course redesign, it is important to consider whether the new goals and objectives are a good fit for the instructor, the course, and the institution, but also—as the key component of these considerations—for the students. Our decision was influenced by a growing sense that the discipline is moving in this direction. In her 2004 article “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Kathleen Blake Yancey persuasively argues that “structural changes—global, educational, technological”—require us to rethink our approaches to teaching.
composition, “all oriented to the circulation of texts, to genre, to media, and to ways that writing gets made, both individually and culturally” (321, 315). We believe that 21CL fits into the mission of FYC, especially as defined by Yancey as a gateway rather than gatekeeper course. FYC ambitiously seeks to prepare students for writing in college courses, in their professions, and in their civic and personal lives (“Made” 306). Digital storytelling assignments already appear across the curriculum; the 21st-century workplace is ever more collaborative, globally dispersed, and mediated by computer screens; our personal lives, too, increasingly rely on media consumption and production for participation in community and culture. In this cultural context, FYC remains true to its traditional goals even as it moves to adopt the objectives of 21CL.

Still, one might ask: Even if it should be done, why should I as an instructor of writing be the one to do it? Questions of disciplinary fit naturally arise as writing becomes more visual, more mediated, and more reliant on technology. While no one, we think, could question that it still requires rhetorical design and compositional strategies (see Yancey “Looking”), such writing begins to verge on the traditional bailiwick of other fields, including communications and information sciences and technology. In 2004, Yancey noted one such challenge to disciplinary ownership of these literacies: “[Elizabeth Daley, dean of the USC School of Television and Cinema] proposes that the literacy of the screen, which she says parallels oral literacy and print literacy, becomes a third literacy required of all undergraduates. Not surprisingly, she believes such literacy should be taught not in composition classrooms but in media studies programs” (“Made” 305, original emphasis). We do not believe that media analysis and production should be owned by any single department, just as writing is acknowledged as a key component of an undergraduate education across the curriculum. It is possible to foresee a future in which rhetoric merges with media studies, even as it traditionally has with writing and speech, but until that happens we feel that FYC is the best fit because of the close correspondence between the processes of writing and media production and because of the amount of writing involved in media production.

A second issue of concern addresses personal and institutional fit. Colleagues who have invested years perfecting traditional modes of teaching and who have seen valuable learning emerge from traditional courses might find insufficient exigency or opportunity to learn the theoretical and master the practical requirements of this approach to composition. This question is particularly relevant to those of us who teach in two-year colleges and campuses. These institutions serve student populations and pursue missions that seem, at least at first glance, an unlikely fit with instruction in 21CL. If our students lack the basic skills of English usage, our colleagues sometimes ask, how do you justify spending class time analyzing and producing multimedia texts? Perhaps the greatest challenge we faced over the past three years has been the struggle to integrate the objectives of 21CL into FYC without sacrificing attention to the basic research and writing skills that are so necessary to the success of our students.
Can I Do This?

Assuming at least a tentative or qualified answer of “Yes” to the first questions, it remains to consider feasibility. Implementing 21CL into FYC occurs best under conditions that might be difficult to find at two-year colleges, especially for the contingent faculty who cover so many sections of FYC. First, instructors must be empowered to innovate. At our institution, the director of composition on the main campus sets common objectives to ensure consistency and quality of instruction across the university. Full-time instructors on our campus may choose textbooks, design assignments, and adopt assessment techniques independently, but the autonomy we enjoy is not extended to part-time faculty on our campus or even to full-time faculty on other campuses of our institution.

Second, students require access to computer labs, media production studios, collaborative group workspaces, and ideally a learning commons. (This model of library design brings together all of the facilities and services necessary to support 21st-century learning [MacWhinnie].) Other useful resources include laptops and media recording hardware as well as reliable wireless connectivity and power recharging stations. Also helpful, if not absolutely essential, is financial support from the institution; it is rare to hear of faculty engaging in innovative course design without grant funds to support release from teaching, conference travel, teaching and research assistance, or all of the above. Finally, this kind of teaching benefits from what Randy Bass calls “team-based design,” a collaborative process through which information technology staff, instructional designers, teaching and learning center consultants, writing center staff, and librarians contribute to the course design and serve as instructional partners through the semester. The availability of these resources should guide decisions about whether to engage in a full course redesign, a partial course or single assignment adjustment, or a conversation with colleagues and campus administrators about the need for these kinds of support.

Every instructor will have to find ways to work within the material conditions on his or her campus in order to incorporate the objectives listed in the NCTE statement on 21CL, but that is always the case with any curricular reform. Our intention is that the case study presented here can provide guidance through the recursive process of innovation, assessment, and redesign that we jokingly refer to as “perpetual beta.”

Digital Composition 1.0

In hindsight, our early attempts to bring 21CL into FYC seem too modest and too ambitious, insufficient and overwhelming. Unsure of how our students would receive the course, and how colleagues and administrators would perceive it, we grafted digital media projects onto a well-established and successful syllabus. We asked students to select a single year in American history as the basis for their research and writing and then to produce three papers (a year-in-review exposition, a film analysis, and a material artifact analysis), a historical narrative in digital audio, a collaborative documentary in digital video, and a showcase e-Portfolio. The students’
work demonstrated their achievement of the objectives of 21CL: they operated
digital audio recorders and video cameras, and they mastered sophisticated editing
software like GarageBand and iMovie; they created texts in a variety of media; they
worked in groups to synthesize their individual research; they drew from a wide
variety of print and electronic sources; they attended to copyright and fair use of
Web-based digital materials.

The success of the design also appeared in student evaluations of the course.
Most students found the opportunity to learn new technologies and new modes
of expression exciting and even liberating. We were unprepared for, and frankly
surprised by, a small but vocal minority of students who hated the class, finding
the requirement to use new technologies unreasonable and unnecessary. One stu-
dent, for example, expressed a feeling that the turn from text to multimedia was
gratuitous, that our assignments “indulge [a] fetish for technology” at the expense
of student preference and, ultimately, success. Other negative reactions included
anxiety, confusion, and resentment:

> “How do I do this?” Some students, often those who entered the course with
better writing skills, felt anxiety about adopting new technologies, research
methods, and modes of reading and writing.
> “Why are we doing this?” Some students experienced confusion because
they could not recognize what we asked them to do as composition. One
student explicitly questioned disciplinary fit: “If I wanted to make movies I
would have taken an IST class!” Questions about exigency arose, we sus-
pect, because the assignments were originally designed for text and because
the rhetorical situation (the instructor as audience) remained unchanged.
As Robert E. Cummings points out, traditional courses rarely credit stu-
dents with the ability to write for real audiences beyond the classroom, and
traditionally, instructors are satisfied with attempts to merely imagine realistic
rhetorical situations (20).
> “Why do WE have to do this?” Our students knew that students in other
sections were not doing the same kinds of work. They resented having to de-
velop new skills instead of working toward mastery of existing, familiar skills.

These criticisms of the course were honest, well intentioned, and at least partially
just. They mapped onto the concerns expressed by our colleagues on campus and
noted in the scholarly literature surveyed above. In general, however, students be-
lieved in the value of 21CL; they merely wanted additional support. They needed
models to show them what was required and what was possible; they expected
us to be expert users of the technology we asked them to use; and they wanted
more active intervention by our instructional partners in the writing center, media
production lab, and library.

It is important to acknowledge that we received lower scores on course
evaluations, moving from 5.8 for the course and 5.9 for the instructor to 5.0 and
5.2, respectively, on a 7-point scale. While these numbers improved over time, col-
leagues whose positions are probationary or contingent should anticipate such a
drop and prepare to discuss it with their supervisors. We are grateful for having
received unflagging support and encouragement from our campus administration, but we imagine such would not be the response at every institution.

Our course evaluations rose in subsequent semesters as we made changes to our assignments, course materials, and classroom activities to alleviate the students’ anxiety. We provided the kinds of support they identified as lacking, introducing projects created by students from previous semesters to demonstrate what they can accomplish and encourage what they should accomplish in digital media. We worked with our instructional partners to provide more—and more timely—support: the media production consultants visited class to provide hands-on practice and individual consultations during each digital media project cycle; the reference librarian visited class to provide guidance at point of need and even created a blog to highlight research methods and materials for our course. We also discussed with Writing Center consultants how they could contribute to student success in such unfamiliar forms of writing. Lastly, we addressed the question of our expertise by teaching students the role of instructional partners, encouraging them to seek help from staff members whose expertise appropriately, even necessarily, exceeds ours.

Next, we addressed student confusion about disciplinary fit by highlighting the parallels between media production and traditional writing processes. Jody Shipka explains these parallels succinctly:

First, students working within [a multimodal, task-based] framework are still writing, conducting research, and responding to complex social texts, including ones they have engineered, ones engineered by their peers, and others that they encounter in the curricular and extracurricular domains. Second, in keeping with the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition” adopted in April 2000, students . . . are extensively and deeply involved in [the rhetorical processes outlined in the statement]. Finally, students are still “doing” process and learning about revision. (301–2)

Similarly, Lisa Bickmore and Ron Christiansen emphasize the importance of developing assignments and assignment sequences that actively engage students’ existing familiar practices, encourage them to develop new ones, and invite them to consider how the multimodal documents that emerge from their work and play might function in their lives and in the social setting in which they themselves circulate. (238)

We broke the multimedia assignments into discrete steps, scaffolding from the familiar prewriting practices of invention and research into practices that seem unfamiliar but are not: planning and organizing through storyboards, for example, or composing a script. Other composing activities—shooting video, recording audio, editing, publishing to the Web—might be new to most students, but we further reduced anxiety by grading each step separately, with a slight bias in favor of familiar practices. Finally, we openly discussed the reasoning behind our course design, highlighting the need for 21CL in students’ future college coursework and careers. Over the years, we’ve collected many anecdotes about professors who expect students to complete media projects with no guidance or instruction, about former
students who lead their collaborative groups in such projects, and about parents and alumni who, speaking from experience, describe digital media assignments as “more realistic” for the work world.

We responded to student resentment in two ways. First, we introduced the course by highlighting differences between the work required in our course and in others, encouraging students to stay if they were interested and to switch sections if not. Second, we recognized that in converting two of five assignments to digital media and adding an electronic showcase portfolio, we asked of our students too much in too little time. We underestimated the time required to produce audio and video, not only in mastering the hardware and software but in competing for resources in the media production centers. Reducing the workload from five projects to four allowed us to maintain focus on traditional writing processes while also providing time in class for hands-on practice with hardware and software, library instruction, and collaborative group work.

These changes alleviated the stresses that students felt in our classes; they developed self-confidence in using the new literacies and they expressed more satisfaction with the course: over three semesters (spread across three years), average student evaluations of the course rose from 5.0 to 5.4. Nevertheless, our own assessment indicated that helping our students avoid negative experiences and achieve positive outcomes required further changes to the type of assignments we make, our methods of assessment, and our role in the classroom.

**Digital Composition 2.0**

In fall 2011, in two sections (one honors and one standard), we further revised our course design to encourage students to take responsibility for achieving the goals of FYC and 21CL. To ensure that their work continued to fulfill both the university-wide objectives for FYC and our own objectives related to 21CL, we required one textual essay and one digital, multimedia text; one solo and one collaborative project; one project that employed primary research and one that employed secondary sources. We left the students free to design their other projects according to their preferences. Because the class was not following a common sequence of assignments, students set their own schedule of due dates. (This raises concerns about instructors’ work load and flow; in fact, we did less formal evaluation because we required fewer projects and most students chose more than one collaborative assignment.) Students also participated in assessment, writing short essays describing their “intent, effect, awareness, and design” in each project (Yancey “Looking,” 93). This self-assessment provided necessary context for evaluating work that was, by design, entirely different from one project (and one person) to the next.

We chose as the course theme an interrogation of our institution’s motto. Our intention was to encourage students to understand and relate to the university’s ethos and to articulate an identity as a learner connected to an academic discipline and a set of professional ambitions. Mindful of the warnings raised by Diana George (278) and Michelle Yeo (125) about the potentially limiting effect of assignment
guidelines, we provided students with a heuristic framework [available at http://tinyurl.com/21clFYC] designed to stimulate rhetorical choices that would reflect variety, complexity, and personal engagement. We asked the students to consider writing about our campus or the university as a whole; about academic and co-curricular experiences; about the various roles of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and parents; and about historical timeframes of past, present, and future. We then challenged the students to publish to the Web and to use Twitter and Facebook to create a readership for their writing.

In order to accommodate fifteen to twenty-five self-designed courses running simultaneously in one classroom, we needed to keep our lesson planning to a minimum. In the first third of the semester, we provided students with the information and experiences they needed to make informed decisions about assignment design. We discussed the course theme and brainstormed topics together, thereby building the relationships and rapport necessary for successful collaboration; we discussed the rhetorical advantages or limitations of various media by analyzing sample student work in addition to professional models (we used Roger and Me and episodes of This American Life); and our instructional partners made their initial contact with students. At the end of this period, students submitted proposals describing their projects, highlighting how each would fulfill the objectives of the course, assigning themselves due dates, and even planning daily class activities. Thereafter we operated as consultants and facilitators, maintaining constant communication with the students and helping them remain on track. Unstructuring the course in this way allowed us to address questions and problems as they arose rather than seeing work stall until the next class meeting.

The newly redesigned course was a great but not unqualified success. As we hoped, the course theme and heuristic framework guided students toward diverse and creative topics. Given the freedom to choose a medium, the students wrote a lot of essays, often on commonplace topics such as college sports, extracurricular activities, coming to college, choosing a major, and the like. Some excellent projects emerged as papers; for example, a journalism student attended each event in the campus’s lecture series and argued that more students should take advantage of these opportunities for enrichment. On the whole, though, students treated essays as a safe, secure option—a kind of writing they could do quickly, with relative ease, and well.

The digital media projects, usually the product of collaborative groups, were much more imaginative in topic, more ambitious in the depth and scope of research, and more sophisticated in rhetorical intention. Some examples illustrate the ways in which the students engaged with the objectives of 21CL:

> A documentary film about an engineering alumnus who became a vintner. The intended audience included prospective students and undecided majors, and the implied thesis argued that our university prepares students for success in life, not merely in a specific job.

> An audio podcast highlighting features of the campus honors program, including new scholarships and use of an iPad. While intended to recruit
students to the program, the text provided useful feedback for the faculty honors committee.

> A documentary film, drawing on materials in the campus archives, memorializing a former administrator whose name appears on the largest classroom and laboratory building on campus, but whose character and career were unknown to most in the campus community.

> A video appealing to students to notice and appreciate staff members on campus. The filmmakers interviewed a housekeeper and a campus police officer about how their work is informed by the university’s motto; they spent several hours shadowing each woman in her work and observing her interactions with students. The result was a moving statement about the loyalty and commitment to student service that our institution engenders.

Such work—original in its choice of topic, purpose, and audience(s)—demonstrates a level of engagement rarely found in the traditional composition courses we taught in the past, and that engagement correlates directly with the choice of projects that engage with 21CL.

At the end of the semester we asked the students to evaluate their achievement in the class. We asked them not to consider their grades but rather their aggregate achievement of the course objectives. Many students included more subjective evaluation of their experience in the course, and those reflections allowed us to assess whether our redesign had successfully addressed the anxiety, confusion, and resentment we encountered in previous semesters.

Almost unanimously, students approved of the emphasis on technology and multimedia. One student wrote, “Honestly, I’m not very good with technology. I’ve never even really used PowerPoint. Although I did not make a movie or podcast, I used the program Prezi [www.prezi.com] for one of my projects. After practicing with it, I got the hang of it and loved it so much that I used the program for my biology project.” Another student observed that “though I was reluctant at first, I eventually warmed up to the idea & used [Prezi and Weebly.com] to the best of my ability. They made what could have been a traditional paper stand out and gave my work some style. Using Prezi was definitely a unique challenging and fun experience. And if given the chance I wouldn’t hesitate to use it again for future projects.” Comments like these proved that the course achieved a key goal of FYC, helping students master writing skills necessary for their future endeavors, in addition to introducing new technologies.

The course also eliminated confusion about unfamiliar writing processes. Describing her work on a collaborative video, one student wrote: “I started to realize that the project reflected a paper. We had a title, an introduction, the description of each buildings [sic] as body paragraphs, a conclusion, and our rolling credits as our bibliography. Though we weren’t writing papers like a traditional writing class, we were still writing but in a more unique way.” Another student spoke of learning new media as adding skills to her repertoire: “I believe this [experience with new technology] . . . benefitted me the most because if I am asked in a future class or
job to make a presentation, PowerPoint will be the last option on my mind. I could now make it with Prezi or iMovie thanks to this course.

We were pleased to see students recognize and consciously use the rhetorical advantages of digital media. “In high school,” one student wrote, “I was used to writing for my teachers. But here, I started to open to other audiences, such as prospective students.” Another noted the reach of YouTube and its potential as a publishing venue: “Already I can think of many uses for [video podcasting], mainly at where I work, as such videos could help reach out to the community as a whole.” Others demonstrated a self-awareness about themselves as researchers we haven’t typically seen in first-year students, identifying growth in their research methods and an expansion of the materials from which they drew. Writing a particular paper, one student wrote, “taught me new research skills as it was one of the first times I ever used books to help me write a paper and I can only imagine that it won’t be the last.” Of a collaborative PowerPoint with voiceover narration, a student observed, “Again, we used various modes of research and we had to be especially careful about copyright infringement because we used so many pictures [from the Internet].” A student who completed three digital media projects noted: “I soon learned that book and internet research are not the best choice for every project; sometimes a primary source will give your project what it needs to stand out.”

Allowing students to choose how to spend each class period reduced or removed resistance to collaboration. Perhaps because of the complexity and number of tasks involved in digital media production, the students saw value in working in groups, and they appreciated the opportunity to use class time for planning and producing work. One student reported turning a situation about which he might have become resentful into an opportunity for personal growth: “Throughout the course I also learned I could step in as a leader if the situation calls for it. When our group project wasn’t turning out as planned, I had to constantly improvise and work with the lemons handed to me to try to make the most out of what could have been a bad situation. Though leadership wasn’t my preferred role, it was a relief that I was still able to get things done, and lead my group toward an interesting project.”

The major criticism of the course design concerned the self-designed schedule, which many students found difficult to manage: “I am used to teachers throwing a paper with instructions in front of you and a deadline… Even though the course worked out fine, I would still change the course layout in a way that there are deadlines for projects and that those projects have specific guidelines and instructions in which to do them.” Yet most students who mentioned feeling such anxiety decided, in the end, that the experience helped them develop personal responsibility, time management skills, and self-reliance. They also expressed satisfaction with the course in terms of their engagement with each other, with the institution, and with intellectual inquiry.

As we consider the next iteration of the course, this anxiety about the schedule needs to be addressed. In hindsight, it was a mistake to spend almost a third of the semester preparing and planning and only two-thirds producing. We
will assign an essay early in the semester to introduce the writing process and the writing standards employed by our university. We plan to institute a points-based grading system similar to that proposed by Denise Marchionda in “Point by Point: Adding Up Motivation.” Assigning specific points to behaviors that produce better writing (such as attendance and participation in peer review) and to each product of the writing process puts students in greater control of their grades and is an excellent fit with our emphasis on autonomy and agency. The system can be modified to provide incentives for choosing more ambitious projects, and specifically those requiring the use of 21CL. By setting an expectation for a certain number of points to be earned by specific dates, we can provide more guidance in the students’ planning and scheduling.

We should note that the majority of students never bought into the idea of creating a virtual audience for their writing. The idea is sound, however: those students who posted their work to the course blog or to Facebook saw—through improved hit counts and positive comments—a real audience encountering and appreciating their work. Web publication is not for everyone, of course, especially given the legitimate privacy concerns many have. Nevertheless, those students who wrote with a real—if virtual—audience in mind produced much more interesting and engaging work. We will continue to make students aware of that advantage and to encourage (but not require) them to take advantage of the opportunity.

Lastly, we found that an absence of learning spaces designed for 21st-century learning limited what could be achieved in unstructuring the course. Meeting in a standard classroom forced students to leave in order to perform many of the tasks they set for themselves. Until our facilities catch up with those on the main campus—adding a Knowledge Commons containing collaborative work spaces, iMac-equipped instruction labs, and onsite consulting services from IT, media production, library, and writing center staff—our students cannot perform every task on their own schedule, under our supervision, and with our support (MacWhinnie).

**Final Thoughts**

In her 2008 NCTE Presidential Address, Kathleen Yancey quotes Brent Staples: “What we need now is a revolution in writing instruction, not just another test prep exercise” (321). That revolution is underway. In a 2011 job search for a rhetoric and composition specialist on our campus, we found that most recent graduates took courses, engaged in research projects, or sought professional development in the areas of computers and composition and teaching and learning with technology. Secondary and even primary school teachers now include objectives of 21CL in their curricula, and students armed with these literacies have already reached college campuses. Teaching 21CL will soon become standard at every level of education. The only open question, in our view, concerns what discipline will take responsibility for it. Some time ago, word processing and basic computer skills entered the college curriculum to enable students to adjust to new means of textual production, only to fall away as those skills became standard. It is tempting to say that writing
instructors who resist adopting 21CL into their course designs can weather the storm, continuing to focus on rhetorical principles and familiar composition practices while waiting for the students to gain new media skills elsewhere. Bickmore and Christiansen argue against this temptation:

Situating the production of multimodal pieces in their contexts of use allows an instructor to see them as embodying a communicative aim, rather than as stand-alone assignments, which therefore must merely meet criteria and exhibit features. A more situated approach—which almost certainly entails envisioning the scope and sequence of the entire course and not just of a single assignment—can help to focus the evaluative gaze, making the entire project of evaluating student work more rhetorical. (239–40)

We, too, have found that the challenge of bringing 21CL to FYC lies not in teaching new means of textual production but in adjusting classroom practices to accommodate new rhetorical situations.

The changes we made to FYC over the last three years were modest and incremental, but taken as a whole they transformed our approach to teaching and the learning experience of our students. The process has not been quick, nor has it been easy—and it is not over. In making writing dependent on, or at least integrated with, technology and online contexts, instructors submit to the need to update course designs and lesson plans at the speed at which changes appear there. Nevertheless, we hope that our example helps to convince colleagues to give this approach to FYC a try. In spite of—and sometimes even because of—the challenges involved, teaching these courses has been more engaging and fun than any others in our now nearly twenty years in the profession.

Works Cited


Maggie Gordon Froehlich is assistant professor of English at The Pennsylvania State University, Hazleton, where she teaches courses in composition, literature, and professional writing; her research on twentieth-century American literature and culture has appeared in journals including the F. Scott Fitzgerald Review, Space Between, Literature/Film Quarterly, and Clues: A Journal of Detection. Peter Alan Froehlich is also assistant professor of English at The Pennsylvania State University, Hazleton; his current research project examines the juxtaposition of plantation and frontier mythology as expressed through the grotesque in the novels of William Faulkner.