RSD Year-end Report

To: Dr. Renee Howarton, Director, Nakatani Teaching and Learning Center

From: Dr. Peter B. Olson, Lecturer, Department of English and Philosophy

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RE: Research Skills Development Community of Practice, Final Report

In this final report on my involvement with the RSD-CoP I propose to reflect on my experience in general and then discuss my specific applications of the Research Skills Development Framework in a classroom setting. During the spring semester of 2016 I was assigned three EN 101 (composition 1) sections. I chose to intentionally utilize the RSD framework within the context of a sequence of assignments that ask students to research and write about e-car consumers and their interest in climate change.

The first assignment asks students to explore through research the ways consumers understand climate change. This assignment located exploratory research at the RSD’s Level 1, “prescribed research.” The next assignment asks students to compose a persuasive research proposal based on the research they have already completed, and then to craft an annotated bibliography. This second assignment, also grounded in the research question involving consumers and climate change, is situated at the RSD’s level two, “bounded research.”

The third related assignment has students compose a rhetorical analysis paper to demonstrate their growing knowledge of rhetorical concepts and analytical skills. This assignment requires them to research and select an e-car advertisement, analyze its rhetorical appeals, and then ground analytical claims in reasons and evidence. The creating of inferential reasons is a creative and evaluative addition to the exploratory and persuasive writing already completed. This third assignment has students working at the RSD’s level three, “scaffolded research.”

At the completion of each assignment students completed a questionnaire comprising twelve questions using a Likert scale. I received IRB approval for these anonymously given survey questions. The questions were posted in D2L using the Qualtrix data survey tool. The survey was designed to discover how students felt about their progress as they moved from exploring, to persuading, to analyzing; each stage is seen as a more involved rhetorical strategy requiring more depth in critical thinking.

The results of these surveys indicate moderate success, which I gather indicates mixed qualitative responses to increasing intellectual, rhetorical, and research challenges. Correlating the performances measured by the surveys with attendance might give a more situated understanding of the findings. While these surveys were anonymously taken, the results seemed to track the overall level of attendance, and with that one might gather inferences about student motivation as it relates to the RSD framework. As students work through the “facets of research” (embark and clarify, find and generate, evaluate and reflect, organize and manage, analyze and synthesize, communicate and apply), conceived...
vertically as an ascending set of challenges, and at the same time moving horizontally from highly structured directions, to bounded and channeled instructions, to scaffolded structures that offer some limited autonomy, student motivation will be, no doubt, a decisive aspect of a successful and effective RSDF experience. The question for future application of the RSDF then will be to structure this set of procedures and assignments squarely on the correlation between the framework and student involvement to maximize positive qualitative outcomes at the level of the survey output.

I joined the RSD-CoP in late-August of 2015. I had already taught my Comp 1 “climate change” course at Stout for two semesters. As I studied the RSDF template I couldn’t help noticing that my sequence of assignments mapped on to the RSD framework. As an experienced teacher of writing and rhetoric I was already well acquainted with concepts of scaffolding and flipping. I have broadly accepted the notions of objectives and outcomes and reverse engineering (I have never adopted the expression “backward design” for its obvious luddite connotations). One of the primary issues in writing classes in the first-year-composition arena, and in other writing-extensive classes as well, is the concern for content. In other words, one must decide what constitutes the content of a FYC course. There is much debate about this question.

When I began teaching FYC (comp 1) at Stout I chose *The Bedford Book of Genres* and *Understanding Rhetoric* (a graphic-novel-style text). It seemed to me at the time, given Stout’s poly-tech perspective, that a first-year writing class in such a setting would involve a working understanding of various genres, from artist’s statements and literacy narratives, to op-ed pieces and encyclopedia articles, to peer-reviewed research papers, blogs, and critical analysis papers. Moreover, I guessed that learning about rhetorical situations in the classroom-to-workplace continuum might be benefitted by the decentering of college text assumptions with a surprising rhetorical move of facilitating learning through graphic and visual literacy undergirded by narrative form. So, I had two trajectories working: writing in genres and using graphic narrative to explain the importance of understanding rhetorical situations.

Enter climate change. Since Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* appeared in 2006 the issue of climate change has been a hot spot for cultural conflict along political lines. Even as the GOP sought to marginalize the Obama administration, there has been a steady increase in many demographic sectors of a discourse about climate change. Looking back to 2004, when I was teaching as an adjunct at the University of North Alabama at the height of the Bush era, two interesting events occurred. A meteorology professor in Huntsville wrote an op-ed denying climate change (and it is well known that at the time The Weather Channel was at pains to discuss the topic), and the UNA English department couldn’t agree on a comp 1 textbook, so I had to make my own.

I chose a number of articles from sources like *The Atlantic* and various newspapers. Given the regional nature of northern Alabama and its cultural constraints, I had students read Richard Florida’s *Washington Monthly* article “The Rise of the Creative Class.” I was interested in its mantra for three “Ts” (technology, talent, and tolerance). I was also interested in the data that shows that these qualities correlate to economic sectors that are affected by agglomeration in demographics situated by progressive thinking; take for example the emergence of a creative class and its converging information technology. Soon, even Wal-mart would go green.
After introducing students to Thomas Friedman’s writing I came across an interesting article in the LA Times: “The Creative Class Warms to Climate Change,” by Nick Shulz, editor of TechCentral. His thesis is that the debate over climate change is flawed. By its nature science works on the basis of hypothesis; the argument held by climate change “deniers” is not based in hypothesis: therefore, the bifurcation is a non sequitur. Shulz argues instead that acceptance (or rejection) of climate change is largely a matter of the myths we accept. Shulz posits that the creative class and its media networks is responsible for a shift in the way climate change discourses operate. Of course, the momentum in this progression fluctuates according to politics, but by 2015 there has been an empirically demonstrated rise in the consumption of e-cars, and growing body of demographic research to support a qualitative analysis.

With this background in mind I joined the RSD-CoP and saw a means of involving students in a topic whose content suggested strong rhetorical material, and at the same time saw a way to avoid regarding climate change as a zero-sum game. We could research the demographics of e-car consumption and discover, empirically, how this socioeconomic shift is occurring, and analyze, rhetorically, the messages that frame the mythology that persuades e-car buyers. Upon this premise I structure my three assignments and their purposes: to explore, to persuade, to analyze. Thanks to a tip from Dr. Howarton, I came across Anne Beaufort’s College Writing and Beyond, an analysis of FYC and the classroom-to-workplace continuum for writing; Beaufort’s “framework” amalgamates content by conjoining rhetoric, genre, subject matter, and process. This was my “shock of recognition.” I was already doing this.

But I needed to clear up two other matters. The first concern anticipates that question of “content.” I found myself researching articles that indicate that teaching climate change has positive benefits to students who are raised to be skeptical of liberalism. Underscoring that concern, though is a tracing out of several strands of “writing as a subject.” While the loose concept of “writing process” has been widely adopted, historically, for many writing theorists, the concept of process was emancipated from FYC at about the moment of the termination of the Clinton era. Process, it seems, is political. Theorists began touting “post-process” as a work around that has a distinctly poststructural ring. Then, curiously, at about the moment when Rumsfeld made “news” a new cohort of writing pedagogues began talking about “content” more seriously. The postructural decenteredness of post-process “writing about writing” gave way to a (re)centered concern for something to talk about. Students write better if they have a topic. Can writing itself be a topic? And what about writing can be transferred to other courses and spaces? These questions gave birth to “teaching for transfer” and the use of portfolio assessment.

Assessment, then, is the elephant in the room. The concern for writing about writing is largely a worry that pedagogy may be overly prescriptive, but assessment seeking to measure outcomes depends on a modicum of prescriptive instruction from which to measure successful learning. The RSD helps, obviously, by building its scaffold on a continuum beginning at the level—unabashedly—of prescription. At some distance from prescription, portfolio assessment is solidly descriptive, and metacognitive. Again, the RSD helps fill the gap between prescription and description. So does Beaufort’s writing framework, which builds a heuristic model centered on genre and rhetoric, that depends on subject matter knowledge (threshold concepts), and admits of a process, which of course is flexible and genre sensitive. It would seem then that an assessment model needs to be configured out of the theoretical matrices that inform instructional design.