LISTENING TO SEE: A FEMINIST APPROACH TO DESIGN LITERACY

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At present, we are fully challenged to imagine new ways of locating the reader in relation

to new textual and extra-textual forms; articulating and enhancing our aesthetic

sensibilities for valuing what we are seeing; developing interpretive or sense-making

frameworks; and, quite important, developing pedagogical frameworks and classroom

strategies in order to transmit what we are coming to know to new generations of writers,

readers, rhetoric, and scholars. …such moves are useful, not only for feminist rhetorical

practices, but also for the field of rhetoric, composition, and literacy more generally.

(Gesa E. Kirsch & Jacqueline J. Royster, "Feminist Rhetorical Practices," 663)

As evidenced by journal articles, conference titles, and textbooks, it seems fair to say that

composition scholarship and practice, to varying degrees, have taken up the charge of

multimodal composition. It is no longer particularly new or novel to contend that oral, written,

and visual communication are modes of meaning worthy of attention within any classroom that

engages in textual production and analysis (New London Group 1996; Selber 2004; Shipka,

2005; Wysocki, et al. 2004; Yancey 2004)[1]. Still, there often remains a disconnect between what

we preach and what we practice, particularly when it comes to engaging with design elements—

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[1] One of the first calls for this work was the New London Group who argued "literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (61). The implementation of such pedagogies acknowledges the realities of globalization, rapid technological advancements, and diverse classrooms, and thus provides a teaching method "in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes" (5).

those elements such as color, font, and shape that comprise a text's layout. In spite of

theoretically acknowledging rhetoric as a form of meaning making, our tools for teaching

design—namely handbooks and textbooks—tend to oversimplify design analysis and production,

treating it primarily as a means for making a text's content readable and visually pleasing. For

those of us committed to a multimodal pedagogy, and who want to bring design to a more richly

discursive level, I propose we place feminist rhetorical practices alongside the goals of a digital

feminist pedagogy in order to refigure multimodal pedagogies of design.

What is a (Digital) Feminist Pedagogy?

Those of us who teach composition tend to understand composing as James Berlin argued

years ago, that we aren't just teaching "writing" — or, in light of multimodal considerations, I

would say "composing"— but instead are "teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of

ordering and making sense if it" (268). For years, feminist pedagogies have been acutely aware

of this truth not only in composition studies but across pedagogies. Consider, for example, Mary

Belenky's formative *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Written nearly twenty-five years ago, this

study encouraged an understanding of how cultural

constructions, specifically gender, play a role in

knowing and thusly should be taken into

Employing A Feminist Pedagogy
Task #1:
Acknowledging that various ~~pedagogies support various ways of~~

consideration by educators—for if different students experience different ways of knowing,

educators must consider the potential of pedagogies to enable or disable a range of knowledges[2].

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[2] Such studies arguably spring boarded early scholarship in composition exploring women's composing practices
and feminist approaches to writing instruction (see, for example, Caywood and Overing 1987; Flynn 1988; Hollis
1992; Myers-Zawacki 1992; Ritchie and Boardman 1999) and helped build the foundation for those studying the
digital composing practices of women (see, for example, Hawisher and Sullivan 1998; Blair and Takayoshi 1999;
Blair, Gajjala, Tulley 2009; DeVoss and Selfe 2002; Sullivan 1997).

One means of enabling a range of knowledges is to encourage reflection through both analysis and production of texts. Belenky describes that reflection

Employing A Feminist Pedagogy

Task #2:

Encouraging student reflection through analysis and production of

requires oral and written forms of language to move between "persons who both speak and listen or read and write" (26). This exchange of information encourages individuals to bring their whole self to the table and to question their own beliefs and assumptions as well as those of others. This critical work of both analyzing and producing texts helps students engage with ways of representing

Employing A Feminist Pedagogy

Task #3:

Encouraging student representations of self that allow for participation in

the self. This representation of self allows for participation in the social and intellectual life of communities.

Employing a feminist pedagogy—which Diana L. Gustafson defines as characterized by "a self-conscious, critical and intense process of gazing inward and outward that results in questioning assumptions, identifying problems, and organizing for change " (249)—does not require one necessarily argues for, or even embraces, that women do or don't learn differently then men. Instead, it acknowledges that subjectivities matter, and thus educators should work to enable all students to analyze and produce texts, and to value modes of meaning that help individuals represent themselves and their experiences.

A digital feminist pedagogy shares the goals of a feminist pedagogy, but pays particular attention to digital texts. I define a digital feminist pedagogy as one **that enables and encourages questioning, reflection, participation, and agency through the critical use and exploration of digital technologies.** In this capacity, I am concerned with how those of us

engaged in multimodal pedagogies might enable our students to consciously and critically

engage with digital tools for representing their experiences so that they might engage and enter

the social and intellectual lives of their communities. A digital feminist pedagogy recognizes that

today, "community" is found not only in face-to-face spaces but also in the networked spaces of

the Internet.

Social-networking sites, messageboards, and interactive blogs, for example, all function

as communities of practice, that is, as spaces where individuals come together through the

"sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (Wenger, 45). Participation within these communities

contributes to the construction of shared and individual identities, yet these identities in online

spaces are represented not only through the exchange of the written word, but also the exchange

of visuals—such spaces are necessarily multimodal. In online communities, users communicate

through pictures, shapes, colors, sounds, fonts, and organization in order to represent and support

ideas. In this way, reflection occurs not just through those who "speak and listen, or read and

write" but also through those who "see and design" or as I will be arguing, those who *listen* and

design. Thus, a digital feminist pedagogy is mindfully attuned to all modes of meaning making,

including design analysis and production.

In the remainder of this paper, I first describe how and why design literacy is important to

a digital feminist pedagogy. Next, I describe a commonly used, yet problematic, model for

teaching design. In order to offer a possible solution to this model, I turn my attention to feminist

rhetorical criticism so as reframe design pedagogy through rhetorical listening. While there are

other approaches to the study of listening[3], I suggest a digital feminist pedagogy of design is

uniquely served through the lens of feminist rhetorical listening.

Engaging With Design

In the multimodal space of online communication, visuals (both the pictorial and the

design elements, i.e. shape, color, and layout) along with text make up the bulk of information.

Composition, rhetoric and literacy scholars have worked to engage with the proliferation of the

visual mode, for as composition scholar Diana George notes:

> For students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture,
>
> questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as
>
> attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world
>
> around them. (32)

Composition and rhetoric scholars[4] continue to argue for increased attention to visual

communication, and practitioners of a digital feminist pedagogy should consider how to best do

this work.

For the most part, those of us engaged with feminist pedagogies are fairly equipped to

address one type of visual: pictorial representations such as film or photographs. Along with

scholarship on objectification and the gaze (Berger 1972; Mulvey 1975; Neale 1992; Kaplan

2000) films like Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly*[5]—which directly confront the role of pictures

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[3] See, for example, the work of Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn, as well as the *International Journal of Listening* (which comes primarily out of an educational psychology and speech communication perspective).

[4] Hocks 2003; Selfe 2003; Williams 2003; Wysocki 2003; Yancey 2004.

[5] Kilbourne's original was in 1979. *Still Killing Us Softly* in 1987, and *Killing Us Softly 3* in 1999.

in advertising and the role they play to disempower and silence—as well as essays by such

authors as Susan Bordo, often make their way into composition classrooms. These texts and

subsequent engagement with pictorial representations helps provide analytical strategies for

teaching with and about the role of images, both on and offline. Yet, given the landscape of

online spaces in particular—spaces comprised not just of words and pictorial images, but also of

design elements—I find it troubling that we may ignore and/or feel unprepared to address the

role of design elements, those elements such as colors, shapes, symbols, and organization. I

believe these elements are worthy of our critical attention, and that listening can provide us a

lens for a digital feminist pedagogy of design.

Design choices are prevalent throughout the Internet, even when we have little choice

over the production of individual design elements. Given the rise of design templates in sites

such as Blogger, Facebook, and Twitter, users rarely choose all design elements to represent

themselves. Yet, they often choose a design template, and this template serves as a mode of

meaning making that represents the self in particular ways. Given that one's choices are limited

within these templates (Arola 2010), it is important for users to consciously think about the ways

in which design constructs the rhetor and the audience. Instead of being merely an aesthetic

choice that has little impact, the design of the space helps shape the way the user and the content

are read. Something as seemingly mundane as choosing a green template over a pink template

undoubtedly is an act of meaning making—it does rhetorical work. Critically engaging with such

choices in our classrooms is important so that we, along with our students, work to self-

consciously produce and consume texts and so that we critically enter the social and intellectual

life of both online and offline digital communities—such skills are crucial to a digital feminist

pedagogy.

Teaching Design: A Common Model

A digital feminist pedagogy is attuned to multiple modes of meaning so as to encourage

an engagement with the multiple tools that students can, and do, use to represent themselves and

their experiences. Feminist pedagogies have placed significant attention on pictorial

representations, yet the prevalence of online communication calls for a critical engagement with

the analysis and production of design elements. One of the most prevalent, and arguably easiest,

models for teaching design employs a set of design standards to use across genres and

purposes—take, for example, Robin Williams' *Non-Designer's Design Book* or most bulleted

lists of design "to-do's" found in many writing handbooks. I will briefly describe the problems

with this model, and then will offer an alternative that enacts a digital feminist pedagogy.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, let me rely briefly on Anne Frances Wysocki and Julia

Jasken's "What Should Be An Unforgettable Face…" in which they examine popular

handbooks and guides that include instruction in interface design. The interface of any online

space is necessarily a designed rhetorical space in that interface designers purposefully choose

graphical elements, fonts, colors, shapes, and sounds. In the early-mid 1990s, computers and

composition scholars brought the rhetoric of software and interface design to the attention of

English Studies (LeBlanc 1990; Selfe and Selfe 1994; Taylor 1992). Wysocki and Jasken look

back to these arguments alongside their study of handbooks so as to stress the importance of

understanding "interfaces as rhetorical" (33). In spite of scholarly understandings of the interface

as rhetorical, textbooks and handbooks tend to enact a limited understanding of the rhetorical

function of design.

In their observations of fourteen handbooks and textbooks that include units designed to

help students analyze and design web pages, Wysocki and Jasken found instruction that:

> often constructs the technical as neutrally ahretorical; emphasizes getting work done—the
>
> values of efficiency, easy of use, and transparency—over other possible human activities
>
> and relations; and separates content from form, as though form contributes nothing to
>
> how others respond to and are shaped by the texts we make for each other. (38)

When it comes to design, these texts ask students to concern themselves with readability and

efficiency. Does the design make the content easy to find and easy to read? If so, then it's

deemed a success. While some texts do ask students to understand how design builds ethos, the

treatment tends to be limited. Overall, Wysocki and Jasken found a lack of pedagogical

instruction that encourages students to consider design as a complex mode of meaning making.

There was little to no acknowledgement of how design can function not just to help with ethos

and readability, but also as a means of sharing and experiencing the self and community in
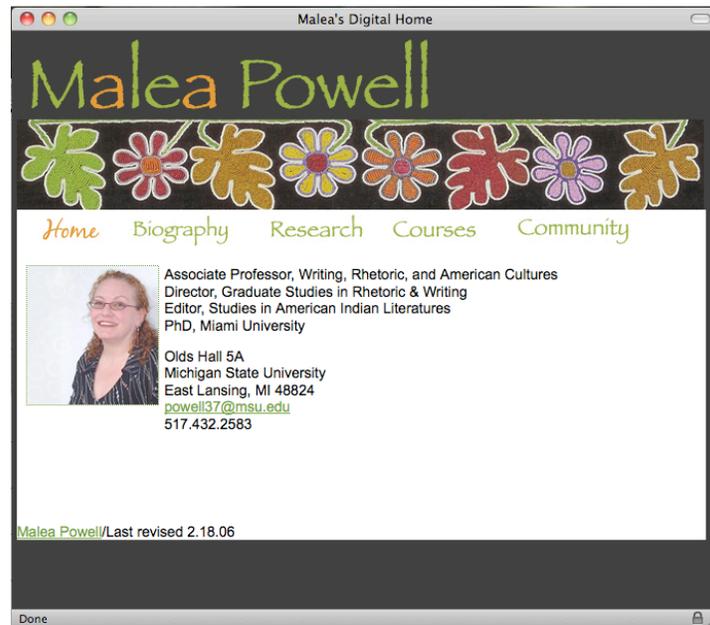
online spaces.

Figure 1: Malea Powell's Homepage

Imagine, for example, were one to teach design analysis solely by using the

aforementioned Robin Williams' design principles. Applying Williams' four design principles—

contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—to this homepage (Figure 1) would likely lead to

a somewhat productive, yet limited, analysis. One might, for example, comment on how the

floral pattern underneath the text "Malea Powell" creates a bright focal point through its contrast

with the black background. Such contrast helps add visual interest to the page. One might also

discuss the repetition of colors and the way in which they help to create a unified design. The

repetition of the color green —which is used for the header and the links—also emphasizes

particular design elements that help make the page usable (in that if you can't find the links, then

you'll have trouble using the page as it's intended). One might also describe how the left

alignment of the text, and the placement of different textual elements in proximity to one

another, help to make the page readable.

This type of analysis is undoubtedly a useful starting point when engaging with design in the classroom, but it results in a limited approach that leaves out the nuances of design as a mode of meaning making. Such design criteria don't explicitly ask students to reflect on the ways design encourages the audience to participate with the text and the author; nor do such criteria encourage students to reflect on how and why they come to understand certain rhetorical choices in particular ways. And, if such analysis leads to production, such criteria doesn't encourage students to reflect on how their own design choices might function beyond making a text visually appealing and usable. Students should be able to articulate not only how design functions, but why and for whom. If we are to employ a digital feminist pedagogy that enables and encourages questioning, reflection, participation, and agency through the critical use and exploration of digital technologies, we must broaden our understanding of the function of design.

Rhetor-Centered Design

I find that in order to enact a digital feminist pedagogy, it is useful to take Wysocki and Jasken's critique and reframe it through a feminist rhetorical lens. Doing so allows me to draw on existing feminist rhetorical criticism and opens up a feminist model for analyzing and producing online designs.

When online design is treated as though its primary function is to create usable and visually appealing texts, we as teachers are left with little room to critically engage with design. The design criteria Wysocki and Jasken critique offer little possibility for interrogating how the design of, say, a Twitter template that includes a light-blue background and outlines of leafless trees differs from one that uses a black background and silver lightening bolts. Such design choices, which are ever present on the Web, function to represent a rhetor and her experiences in

an online community. I term the pedagogical models that Wysocki and Jasken critique as rhetor-centered—that is, under such models one becomes primarily focused on the rhetor's ability to properly convey her message to the audience. The question becomes not, "how does this Twitter template shape your understanding of the author and her experiences?" but instead becomes "does this Twitter template make the content easy to read and access?" Such a focus ignores the ways in which design is content, in that it functions not just as a "wrapper" for the text, but also as a mode of meaning making.

Feminist rhetorical criticism offers a useful take on the problems of employing a rhetor-centered model. Feminist rhetoricians, those concerned with the ways communication can support and dismantle gender inequalities, have understood one major flaw of a rhetor-centered model to be that the rhetor is imagined to have sole control of the communicative environment. Given that a rhetor-centered design model positions the rhetor as one who wields authority over her audience through the correct use of design strategies, this model is similar to the one found in traditional rhetorical theory.

Feminist rhetoricians understand such theories to include and enact a patriarchal bias (Biesecker 1992; Foss & Foss 1994; Foss and Griffin 1992, 1995; Kramarae 1989; Shepard 1992; Spitzack & Carter 1987). Traditional rhetorical theory, as these scholars understand it, assumes the rhetor is in a position of domination, whereas the audience is in a position of submission. In other words, it reinscribes a power structure that is complicit with patriarchal models whereby the speaker (rendered active and male) is in control over and persuades his audience (rendered passive and female).

Sonja Foss and Cynthia Griffin critique this patriarchal model by saying that when a

rhetor's goal is to solely "convince others to adopt their viewpoints," the rhetor "exerts control

over part over those others' lives" ("Beyond Persuasion," 3). It is this taking on of control and

domination, of taking power of the other, that is identified as problematic. For, under this

patriarchal model of rhetoric, the communicative act is treated as though the rhetor can, and

should, control the audience's response through careful rhetorical choices. Thereby, the audience

is figured as homogeneous and as passive receivers of information who, if addressed correctly,

will understand the intentions of, and be persuaded by, the rhetor. This model also circumscribes

the possibilities and potentials of communication, in that we aren't attendant to the ways that

communication can function beyond transmission.

Despite numerous scholarly critiques[6] of rhetor-centered oral and written communication,

this rhetor-centered model reemerges in the pedagogical models of design that Wysocki and

Jasken critique—in part, no doubt, because it provides an easy-to-use model in what at times

may feel an overwhelming endeavor (that is, teaching students not *just* about writing, but about

all modes of meaning making). Yet, when we say that a designer can use certain design criteria

so as to have particular effects on all audiences, the rhetor/designer is imagined as the one with

control and whose primary goal is to effectively communicate text. "Effective" in this case

means efficient, visually pleasing, and legible—in other words, a design that doesn't get in the

way of the alphabetic message but instead bolsters it through making the document easily

transmittable. In teaching this model in the classroom, we set up a fairly basic and

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[6] Feminist rhetorical theorists aren't the only ones to critique this model. Reader-response theory has also done significant work in this area (Fish 1980, 1981; Harkin 2005; Iser 1974, 1978; Salvatori 1983, 1996; Schweikart 1986).

understandable situation where we put all responsibility for and control over communication in

the student's hands: if you build it in the proper way, they will come.

I believe that practitioners of a digital feminist pedagogy should complicate this model so

that we can richly acknowledge and explore how design functions to, in Belenky's words,

"enable individuals to enter the social and intellectual life of their community" (26). I believe a

digital feminist pedagogy must acknowledge how, embedded in an ecology of meaning and

identification, design is far more than a tool for creating efficient, legible, and visually pleasing

documents. Instead, design functions as a complex mode of meaning making.

I now offer listening as a theoretical approach for addressing design beyond rhetor-

centered model. After describing a feminist understanding of listening, specifically through the

lens of rhetorical theory, I offer questions that can help practitioners of a digital feminist

pedagogy address design in the classroom. My intention is that such questions get us out of the

"what" of design (for example, "contrast improves legibility" or "consistent alignment increases

readability") and into the "how" and "why." Such a move embraces a digital feminist pedagogy,

and thus helps us critically engage with the online spaces we embody.

Beyond Rhetor-Centered Models: Listening to Design

Listening itself has been brought up for slightly different, but connected, reasons in

feminist rhetorical scholarship. One vein of scholarship has explored the possibilities of using

listening as a means of paying attention to, or rediscovering, lost voices—specifically recovering

the work of women who have been largely ignored in the rhetorical tradition[7]. Another vein of

scholarship, the one I find particularly relevant to design pedagogy, explores listening as a way

of rethinking the rhetorical situation. Under this model, communication is no longer constructed

as rhetor-centered, but rather as a reciprocal environment.

This act of listening involves both rhetors and audiences being more attuned and

thoughtful to the perspectives enacted in our discourses. Take, for example Jacqueline Jones

Royster who proposes listening as a means for productive cross-cultural communication. She

describes that to be a thoughtful communicator means to

> be awake, awake and listening, awake and operating deliberately on codes of better
>
> conduct in the interest of keeping our boundaries fluid, our discourse invigorated with
>
> multiple perspectives, and our policies and practices well-tuned toward a clearer respect
>
> for human potential…. (40)

Here, she defines listening as a means of operating "on codes of better conduct" so that we keep

ourselves open to new ideas and new ways of seeing and being in the world. Similarly, Krista

Ratcliffe calls for rhetoricians to theorize and practice listening as a rhetorical strategy. She coins

the term "rhetorical listening" which she defines as "a stance of openness that a person may

choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (2005, 1). In this way, rhetorical

listening is an active engagement that allows one to, in the spirit of Gustfason, undertake "a self-

conscious, critical and intense process of grazing inward and outward that results in questioning

assumptions, identifying problems, and organizing for change" (1999, 249).

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[7] For example, see Andrea Lunsford's *Reclaiming Rhetorica,* Cheryl Glenn's *Rhetoric Retold*, Joy
Ritchie's *Available Means*, and Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-
1910.*

Such a stance of openness necessarily entails that we listen not for our own self-interested intent, but instead we listen by "consciously *standing under* discourses that surround us and others, while consciously acknowledging all our particular and fluid standpoints" (1999, 205 emph. mine). When we consciously articulate our discourse's cultural logics, and if we choose to respond to them, "we become responsible for our words, our attitudes, our actions" (208). When working with Ratcliffe's notion of consciously articulating discourses, I find James Paul Gee's definition particularly useful:

> A *Discourse* is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts,' of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network,' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role.' (131)

Discourses are inherently ideological in that they involve an understanding of "who is an insider and who isn't" (132). Articulating such often invisible practices and beliefs can be challenging not only for us, but particularly for our students. Yet, I believe such articulation, or at minimum a striving for such articulation, is key to a digital feminist pedagogy and can greatly enrich our pedagogies of design.

As Ratcliffe describes it, rhetorical listening—insofar as it engages us in a process of questioning, reflecting, and bringing to a discursive level the ideologies functioning within our various communicative situations—is a beneficial model for understanding oral and written communication. Yet, I believe listening can also be a useful theoretical model for engaging with visual communication. Because pedagogical models for teaching design often employ rhetor-centered models and thus render silent discussions about how design functions as a mode for

expressing and representing the self (a self always engaged in one or more particular discourse communities) using listening as a lens for visual design helps us make the familiar unfamiliar.

Given my concern with visual communication, it may seem odd that I want to use a theory of listening as opposed to a term based on vision. I hope I have made somewhat clear that, as Ratcliffe employs it, rhetorical listening is not an auditory act, but instead is a mental act. Given that, as Ratcliffe describes, rhetorical listening is a way of making meaning ("Rhetorical Listening" 202), I choose to use the metaphor of listening because it encourages an act of synesthesia whereby we are encouraged to see through listening. As Ratcliffe explains "sometimes the ear can help us see just as the eye can help us hear" (202). This disruption in our usual understanding of the senses creates a pause whereby we are asked to consider "how *does* one listen to design?"

My heuristic for teaching design through listening—which I provide below—offer ways of answering this query. I believe this pause is particularly useful for educators, for while students may not entirely buy the idea of "listening to design," synesthesia affords us the opportunity to perform critical feminist reflection on the ways in which discourses and ideologies circulate through design. It helps us see, and hear, how design is used as a complex mode of meaning making.

Understanding Design through Listening: Questions for Design

A digital feminist pedagogy of listening to design is underpinned by two key ideas:

1. Listening recognizes that not all design criteria will be successful across all audiences. Instead, listening encourages us to explore in what discourse communities, and within what ideological structures, particular designs have particular meanings

2. Listening recognizes that rhetors compose themselves and their purposes through design, while at the same time design composes the audience as certain types of people and invites users to participate in certain ways based on the discourses and ideologies within which the text circulates.

These recognitions, and the following heuristics, support a digital feminist pedagogy, in that they work to encourage questioning, reflection, participation, and agency through the critical use and exploration of digital technologies.

I offer heuristics instead of criteria, for it is difficult for one set of criteria to be used across all rhetorical situations. I do believe, however, that instructors can utilize the criteria found in current pedagogical models *so long as* these criteria are supplemented with the types of questions that I offer here. For example, there is value in using rhetor-centered design principles such as the Williams' example from above. Such criteria do often help students create readable and visually pleasing texts (goals that are laudable for many designs). My questions below, then, add to such criteria in a way that encourages students to consider how design performs functions beyond aesthetics and legibility. They also encourage students to question under what ideologies efficiency and visually pleasing texts are valued. These questions can be used on their own, without accompanying criteria such as Williams', yet they are most powerful if used after asking students to design with our current pedagogical design criteria.

First, I offer questions for students *producing* design. These questions can be used for

peer reviews of design projects, or as a set of response questions for a student to include with a

final project. When my students produce a multimodal text, I ask them to include a design

justification. This justification, based on theories of feminist rhetorical listening, includes

responses to the following questions:

Design Justification Questions

1. Make a list of each design element you chose to include in your text. Include color,
   shapes, and fonts as well as an overall description of the layout.

2. Next to each design element, write down why you made each design choice.
   Specifically, consider how this design element reflects what **you** think, feel, believe,
   and value.

3. Next to each design element, write down how each element reflects what you imagine
   your audience thinks, feels, believes, and values.

4. Now, instead of looking at each discrete element, consider the overall design. In what
   ways do you hope your audience will participate with your text? In what ways do you
   believe your design choices invite this type of participation? Consider "participation"
   not only what the user will physically do (for eg, their eyes may be drawn to a
   particular area, or they may be encouraged to click on a particular link), but also
   consider how you hope the user will feel when engaging with your text.

These design justification questions first ask students to describe the individual design

elements used in their text. While students may have used criteria such as Williams' to create

their design, this question calls their attention to each individual element and positions them so

as to acknowledge how each design element plays a role in making meaning. Next, students are

asked to consider why they chose each element and in what ways these elements reflect his or

her discourses as well as the audience's discourses. Further discussions could include the

definitions of a discourse community and the ways in which ideologies circulate within

discourses. Even in the absence of such discussions, Questions Two and Three help students

consider the role discourse and ideology play in design, even if such explorations are cursory and

the terminology of "discourse" and "ideology" is avoided. Question Four asks students to

consider how all of the design elements come together to extend an invitation. Students are asked

to consider how their design invites a particular kind of participation with their text.

I offer these questions with the understanding that students' answers may be speculative. I

believe, however, that by considering the discourses from which their design emerged, students

can at least begin to question the ways in which design invites users to participate and in this way

students can begin to bring their understanding of design to a discursive level. These are

questions that a rhetor-centered model does not encourage, but they are questions that are

important if we are to teach students to critically understand design and, by proxy, to consciously

and critically engage with digital tools for representing their experiences so that they might

engage and enter the social and intellectual lives of their communities. Such action reflects the

goals of a digital feminist pedagogy.

By asking students to consider the ways in which each design element reflects what they

believe and what they imagine their audience believes, as well as how the design elements work

together to invite participation, students' attention is drawn to the ways in which design serves as

a mode of complex meaning-making. While these questions are intended to go beyond a rhetor-

centered model, they don't disallow discussions about how design may create legible and

efficient documents. For example, a student may describe how she used a twelve-point serif font

because she believed her audience would expect a standard readable font. Yet the questions also

push the student to consider why, and for whom, such a font is expected. While her answer to

this may be speculative, it still encourages her to question the ideologies behind design norms

and thus critically engage with textual production and analysis.

The above questions are designed for students to use when composing a text. Similar

questions can be used to analyze design, and below I rephrase the questions for such an occasion.

The acts of both producing and analyzing texts, as Belenky describes, are important to a feminist

pedagogy in that both acts encourage individuals to question beliefs and assumptions, and allow

for a representation of self. The hope is that such mindfulness about both production and analysis

can encourage thoughtful participation in the social and intellectual life of communities.

These questions for analysis ask the student to consider how they feel when encountering

a text. These questions also ask the student to *imagine* what the designer wants of them given his

or her design choices. I purposefully ask students to "imagine" what the designer wants of them,

for students cannot, and should not, be asked "what is the designer's intention?" Such a question

is based on a rhetor-centered model whereby we listen only, as Ratcliffe says, *for* intent rather

than *with* intent (*Rhetorical Listening* 28). Instead my questions encourage students to focus on

the ways that certain design choices make them feel, and how these feelings are bound up with

discourse expectations and social constructs. In this way, students can explore how design makes

meaning not always through a set list of prescriptive criteria, but instead through individual users

making meaning given the surrounding discourses and ideologies. Here then are my design

analysis questions based on a listening model:

Design Analysis Questions

1. Make a list of each design element you see in this text. Include color, shapes, and

   fonts as well as an overall description of the layout.

2. Next to each design element, write down how **you** understand these design choices.

   Specifically, consider how you make sense of each design element given what you

   think, feel, believe, and value.

3. Next to each design element, write down how each element reflects what you imagine

   the designer thinks, feels, believes, and values.

4. Now, instead of looking at each discrete element, consider the overall design. In what

   ways do you feel you are invited to participate within or with this text? In what ways

   do you believe the design choices invite this type of participation?

Again, these questions ask students to explore design not through a set list of criteria but

through considering the variety of ways in which design makes meaning. These questions help to

discursively address how design elements are entwined with social structures and experiences

that apply certain meanings to certain shapes, colors, and arrangement of elements.

Listening to Design: A Sample Analysis

To conclude, I want to illustrate how one might use the Design Analysis Questions when encountering a text. I now return to *Figure 1*—the homepage of Malea Powell. If asked to broadly analyze how this design functions rhetorically, one may describe the contrast and repetition of the colors and how they work to create a unified design that is easy to read yet visually engaging (as seen in the above Williams' example). One might also note how the design creates an overall tone or emotional appeal for the content (for example, the welcoming feel of Powell's warm green and orange fonts, or the soft and playful spirit of Powell's border of flowers and leaves) or how the design allows the user to quickly and easily find the links and textual information on the site. These are all reasonable points, but I believe my heuristic helps push such analysis beyond the "what" to the "how" and thus enables the critical thinking required of a digital feminist pedagogy.
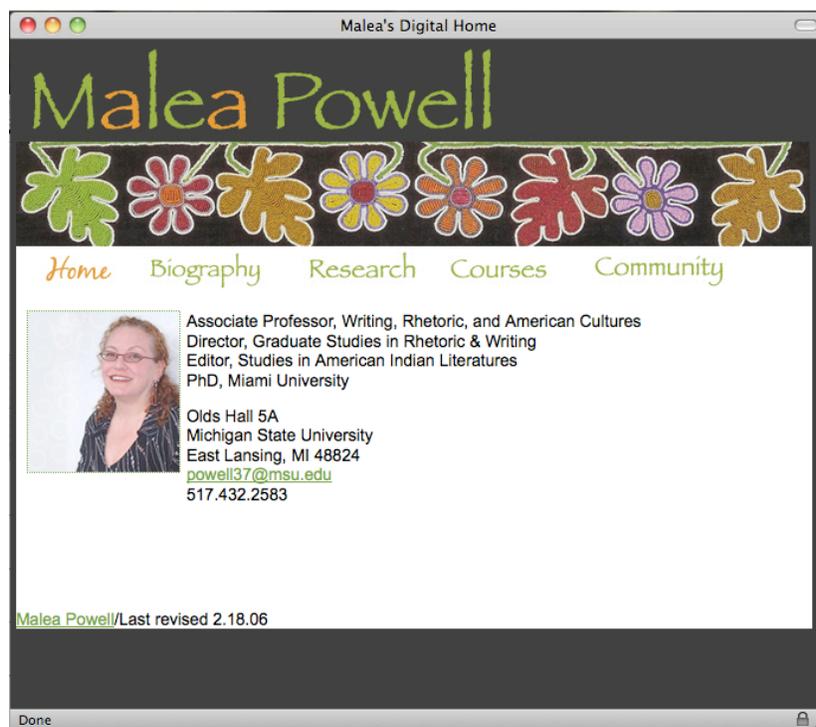

Figure 1: Malea Powell's homepage

I encourage students to engage with the Listening to Design heuristic in two ways. The first is through answering the questions in a tabular format, the majority of which I've included in Appendix A. The second is to do something with this information, whether it be to sum it up in a rhetorical analysis paper, to write a memo to the designer in which they describe how the design is functioning for them, or to present the information in a design critique. I will call your attention here to some key moments in the analysis, and suggest how such analysis helps engage with a digital feminist pedagogy.

You'll notice in the Appendix how Questions 1-3 allow for a careful consideration of each design element's contribution to the whole. The left-hand column includes a list of the elements (Question 1), the middle-column describes the role that particular design element plays in creating meaning for the student (Question 2), and the right-hand column describes what the student imagined the designer intended through her choices (Question 3). Lastly, in the final row of the table, the student is asked to consider the function of the overall design (Question 4).

Consider how this analysis differs, and goes beyond, that found in the rhetor-centered analysis from earlier. For example, when engaging with the design element, "The words 'Malea Powell' written in green and orange in Papyrus typeface" I describe how it strikes me as being, "somewhat old fashioned and serious, while also being earthy and naturalistic." This description, the "what" of the design element, may be similar to one found in a more rhetor-centered analysis. However, the "why" of my understanding is unpacked as I move through my analysis. I describe my sense of the text as "old-fashioned" because "the crackled edges of the font remind me of hand-dipped ink writing you would see on papyrus paper from years ago. … I've had the luxury

of seeing old manuscripts at our University's archives, and many of the fonts look similar." I also

unpack my sense of the text as "earthy and naturalistic" because "I've seen these colors used

before on organic items such as yogurts, lotions, or even yoga clothes. Perhaps because I am

middle class and live in a town with many educated middle to upper-middle class people who are

into organic living, I tend to read these colors in a 'back to the earth' kind of way." Notice how

the analysis goes beyond a focus on readability. Instead, I work to interrogate why certain

elements resonate with me in particular ways, and thus question my own beliefs and assumptions

about design—such critical work is essential to a digital feminist pedagogy.

Asking students to consider why they understand certain designs to function in particular

ways can also help students interrogate and make visible certain aspects of their home

discourses. Consider, for example, how I answer Question 2 (*write down how **you** understand*

these design choices) for the design element, "A row of colorful flowers and leaves in a

beadwork-type pattern." I describe that,

> *I understand this element to be in some way related to Native American beadwork.*
>
> *Because I am part Ojibwa, and because my mother is involved in tribal traditions, I have*
>
> *seen patterns similar to these on various powwow regalia. … I associate this beadwork*
>
> *with Native peoples, particularly women…. I also associate it in an online space like this*
>
> *as illustrating some connection to Native ancestry, or traditions, or perhaps just a*
>
> *general affinity for Native designs.*

Then, when answering Question 3 for the same design element (*write down how each element*

*reflects what you imagine **the designer** thinks, feels, believes, and values*) I describe how

> *I imagine the designer is trying to illustrate some connection to Native traditions and/or*
>
> *an affinity for Native designs. ... I imagine she values Native beadwork in some way,*
>
> *whether she does beadwork herself or simply just appreciates it. I don't know if she*
>
> *thinks the audience will understand the image, as a lot of people might not. But, I*
>
> *imagine she thinks it's important in representing herself in some way.*

To be fair, I chose an example that included a design element that resonated with my own home discourses. Nevertheless, such analysis would likely not occur when engaging with rhetor-centered design criteria—it would be unlikely I would bring my personal life to the table when employing Williams' design principles. The Listening to Design criteria necessarily encourage students to unpack their own discourses when engaging with analysis and production. It might not always be as personal as this example of beadwork, however the question opens up a space for such analysis to occur. This space encourages participation by those who may feel their home discourses are marginalized by the academy. Such a move can help open a space for discursive participation within the community of the classroom.

Finally, notice how I engage with Question 4, which asks the student to look at the design holistically and describe "in what ways do you feel you are invited to participate within or with this text? In what ways do you believe the design choices invite this type of participation?" Pay particular attention to how I discuss issues of usability along with broader concerns of participation and affect.

> *I feel the overall design encourages me to see Malea Powell as an approachable,*
>
> *artistic, and professional professor. The bright colors of the beadwork, contrasted with*
>
> *the black background and very standard black text on white, creates for me a sense of*

reliability and comfort. I believe I am encouraged to participate with this text by first,

seeing her as professional yet approachable (something the standard design choices

along with the more artistic beadwork and bright colors encourages), and second, by

finding what I need quickly and easily (something the link structure and the text blocks

allow me to do). The text treats me as though I am someone who wants to find

information, but wants to do so in a way whereby I learn more about the author than

simply the words provide. I'm not here just to learn where her office is, I'm also here to

get a sense of Professor Powell as a person. Also, because it uses Native beadwork and

because I am familiar with it, it invites me to relate with her through my Native heritage.

Because I am "in the know," I feel a sense of connection that perhaps others would not.

My knowledge of beadwork is honored through her use of this design element.

The act of listening to design—spending time with each element and working to understand the discourses surrounding me, the text, and the designer—enables a rich understanding of the various ways design makes meaning. I was able to take into account my desire for a design that was usable along with my desire for a design that helped me get-to-know the homepage's author. I was also able to bring issues of gender and race to the table, and describe how they shaped the ways I understood the design to function.

This heuristic for listening to design will not necessarily lead all students to immediately interrogate every aspect of their discourse communities, however the act of attempting to understand discourses and ideologies can begin to open doors of understanding and self-reflection. The pause that listening creates provides an opening for the "self-conscious, critical and intense process of gazing inward and outward" that Gustafson argues is essential for a

feminist pedagogy (249). If, as I argued earlier, a digital feminist pedagogy enables and

encourages questioning, reflection, participation, and agency through the critical use or

exploration of digital technologies, listening to design is one avenue of exploring the means

through which design plays a role in various ways of knowing and being. Listening to design can

be a valuable tool for enacting a mindful multimodal pedagogy.

Appendix A

Malea Powell's Website Design Analysis		
1. Design Elements	*2. How I understand each element and how it reflects (or doesn't reflect) what I think, feel, believe, and value*	*3. How each element reflects what I imagine the designer thinks, feels, believes, and values.*
The words "Malea Powell" written in green and orange in Papyrus typeface	Because it is on top of the page, and larger than the rest of the font, I assume this to be the title of the page and/or the author's name. This is largely because of genre conventions, in that I'm used to seeing titles large and on top of web pages. The typeface and color choice strike me as being somewhat old fashioned and serious, while also being earthy and naturalistic. In part this is because the crackled edges of the font remind me of old hand-dipped ink writing you would see on papyrus paper from years ago. I have this association because I've had the luxury of seeing old manuscripts at our University's archives, and many of the fonts are similar looking. The colors feel warm and earthy to me in large part because I've seen these colors used before on organic-type items such as yogurts, lotions, or even yoga clothes. Perhaps because I am middle class and live in a town with many middle-uppermiddle class people who are into organic	I imagine the designer might have been trying to convey a similar feeling as the one that I am having. I imagine the designer thought the typeface would convey a sense of welcoming and earthiness in large part because she probably believes that these colors are something you might find in nature. She probably also is familiar with organic-living products and knew these colors would generate a naturalistic feeling because of the discourses they are often found in. I imagine the designer values the earth and all things natural. I also imagine the designer is well-versed in homepage conventions, as she put the title large and at the top of the page. In this way, the designer is somewhat conventional in a safe way. The font might be a little earthy, but the size and placement are safe. It feels fun, while still being conventional.

	living, I tend to read these colors in a "back to the earth" kind of way.	
A row of colorful flowers and leaves (some of them matching the colors in the name), seemingly done in a beadwork-type pattern	I understand this element to be in some way related to Native American beadwork. Because I am part Ojibwa, and because my mother is involved in tribal traditions, I have seen patterns similar to these on various powwow regalia. When looking closely at the design, you can see the individual beads, which is how I knew it was probably some form of native beadwork. I associate this beadwork with Native peoples, particularly women who tend to be the ones doing this type of crafting. I also associate it in an online space like this as illustrating some connection to native ancestry, or traditions, or perhaps just a general affinity for native designs.	I imagine the designer is trying to illustrate some connection to Native traditions and/or an affinity for Native designs. I imagine she knows something about this, because it would be odd to use this imagine as such a centerpiece of the webpage without knowing anything about it. I imagine she values Native beadwork in some way, whether she does or simply just appreciates it. I don't know if she thinks the audience will understand the image, as a lot of people might not. But, I imagine she thinks it's important in representing herself in some way.
A black background	I understand the black background as being somewhat neutral, in that it is an easy way to make the colorful content stand out against a plain background. This reflects my belief in simplicity, and in certain colors having more rhetorical heft than others. I often associate black backgrounds with more masculine pages, in part because I know a lot of men into science and technology who use black on their webpages. Yet, the flowers on the page take away this	I imagine the designer believes black to be a somewhat neutral color that will make brighter design elements stand out from the page. I find myself thinking that because the designer could've made the background one of the bright colors from the beaded floral background, but chose not to, they must be thinking of a more conservative audience in that the black makes it feel professional in a way that, say, orange, might not.

	masculine sense I might otherwise have and instead I just see it as a neutral, somewhat edgy, background.	
A white content box	This is probably the most invisible element to me on the page. I am so accustomed to seeing words typed on a white background, whether it be in a book or on the screen, that I don't even think about it. It just seems normal and natural somehow. In this way, it reflects my belief in simplicity and order, in that black on white is my norm. Changing these conventions would seem too edgy and would make me not take her as seriously, at least in this context.	I'm thinking the designer probably feels similarly to me here, in that they value simplicity and playing by the rules. That is, a white background for the majority of written content is what many readers are accustomed to, and in this way the design in no way rocks the boat and plays by the rules one generally sees in a Western literate society.
5 links (Home, Biography, Research, Courses, Community). The 4 links to other site page are in the green typeface of the header, and the 1 link of the current page is a script-font in the orange color from the header.	I find myself thinking of consistency and ease-of-use when I look at the links. The colors, because they pull from the header, make the page feel visually consistent, safe, and professional. I value these qualities, particularly when I'm learning about a faculty member at an institution. The current page link, the orange script, is the boldest choice in the link structure in that it doesn't exactly match anything else in terms of style. Yet, because the color is pulled from the header, it feels consistent while still feeling a bit edgy. This reflects my belief that those in positions of power such as professors need to come across as professional and not too	I imagine the designer values order and consistency, and wants the user to feel as though they can find what they're looking for. The designer also seems to want to illustrate sense of professionalism yet in a fun and approachable way. I imagine the designer values people who will see her as professional and orderly, yet artistic and approachable.

	edgy, but maybe just a little bit… I want my professors to be interesting, yet still play by the rules.	
A small photo of Malea Powell	This picture is a square somewhat standard professional headshot. It is positioned in the top left of the white content box (beneath the links), and in this way is one of the first things my eyes are drawn to. It's probably either because I'm so accustomed to reading top to bottom, left to right, that my eyes go to the picture first. It might also be because it is the only picture on the page, thus my eyes are drawn to it because of its contrast. This picture and its placement reflects my training in western literacy practices, and also reflects my value of being able to "put a face to a name."	I imagine the designer values connection to others, in that she wants us to see what she looks like and she presents us with a friendly photo of her smiling. Because the photo is fairly traditional and placed in the top left of the content box, I also imagine the designer feels as though she should play by some of the expected rules for representing the self in a professional setting. I also find myself wondering if she might value approachability because she is a woman in a position of power. She does not show us a stern looking photo (something that people who have trouble with strong women might find off putting), instead she is smiling and friendly looking, and doesn't seem threatening in any way.
2 text blocks. One listing Powell's titles and the other listing her contact information, both in a small, but readable, black Arial typeface	Because of their design and position on the page, these elements appeal to my need to find information easily. Because they are small chunks of text, and are aligned with the image, they are very easy to read. While the rest of the page serves to make Professor Powell seem approachable and unique, this information is sheer facts and appeals to the reality of my life. I may want to feel as	These are perhaps the most standard elements on the page, in that they are blocks of black text on a white background that serve to provide specific information about Powell's position and contact information. I imagine the designer felt as though, because this information is most likely what the audience is looking for, it had to be presented in an expected

	though the designer of the homepage is approachable, professional, and unique, yet the reality is that I work many hours in order to keep my job, and am most likely just visiting this website for the information. The design appeals to my need find the information in an easy-to-read, easy-to-find design.	way.
A footer with a "last revised" date (same typeface as above)	In terms of design, this element is very similar to the two text blocks described above, yet because of its placement at the bottom of the page it is the last thing my eye sees when scanning the page (given I was trained to read top to bottom). It also, in terms of its content, appeals to my value of current and relevant information. I know very quickly when scanning the page how current the information is.	I imagine the designer values genre conventions, in that most home page footers include a "last updated" date. Again, I feel like the designer is "playing by the rules" and keeping the page within an expected genre. The designer is also illustrating a value of time, in that she wants us to know how relevant and timely the information on the page is.

4. Now, instead of looking at each discrete element, consider the overall design. In what ways do you feel you are invited to participate within or with this text? In what ways do you believe the design choices invite this type of participation?

I feel the overall design encourages me to see Dr. Malea Powell as an approachable, artistic, and professional professor. The bright colors of the beadwork, contrasted with the black background and very standard black text on white, creates for me a sense of reliability and comfort. I believe I am encouraged to participate with this text by first, seeing her as professional yet approachable (something the standard design choices along with the more artistic beadwork and bright colors encourages), and second, by finding what I need quickly and easily (something the link structure and the text blocks allow me to do). The text treats me as though I am someone who wants to find information, but wants to do so in a way whereby I learn more about the author than simply the words provide. I'm not here just to learn where her office is, I'm also here to get a sense of Dr. Powell as a person. Also, because it uses Native beadwork and because I am familiar with it,

it invites me to relate with her through my Native heritage. Because I am "in the know," I feel a sense of connection that perhaps others would not. My knowledge of beadwork is honored through her use of this design element.

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