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*Rhetoric and Composition: A Guide for the College Writer (*2005-Present)

Free from WikiBooks at: http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Rhetoric_and_Composition, (172 pages to date), available in hyperlink, PDF, and "printable" platforms.

"All Right, then, here's our Rhetoric and

Composition wiki book. Much work left to do; but

the longest book begins with a single edit!" –

Matthew Barton, 27 April, 2005

There is a new way in which "Literacy and Technology" is intersecting with the college

classroom . . . The wiki textbook. One such textbook, *Rhetoric and Composition,* was started in

April, 2005, and was the brainchild of Matthew Barton, an assistant professor of English at Saint

Cloud State University. Worried about the cost of textbooks, Barton came up with the idea of

creating a free rhetoric and composition text, which would utilize the wiki platform, as well as

the talents of anyone who wished to contribute to the project. In January, 2005, Barton posted a

call on the *Kairos News Weblog[4]* looking for anyone interested in participating, while laying out

his vision for a peer-reviewed community built wiki textbook on rhetoric and composition

(Kairosnews-Contributors "A Free Composition Textbook" par. 1-9). His call met with little

enthusiasm or interest in participation; consequently Barton started the process himself in April

of that same year. However, as the summer of 2005 began to ebb, Barton again announced

another progressive idea . . . if this textbook was to be made available to students, why not let the

students help write the wikitext as a course project: "I've decided to conduct a rather risky

experiment in my Computers and English course this semester: A semester-long class project

whose goal is to create a free wikitext for use as a first-year composition textbook" (Kairosnews-

Contributors "Class Project: Free Wiki Textbook" par. 1). With these two daring ideas came the

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[4] A Weblog for Discussing Rhetoric, Technology and Pedagogy: http://kairosnews.org/.

award winning wiki publication of *Rhetoric and Composition.*[5] This review will briefly examine

the wiki platform, origin, and culture, followed by a review of *Rhetoric and Composition.*

As defined by *Wikipedia*, a wiki "is a collection of web pages designed to enable anyone

who accesses it to contribute or modify content, using a simplified markup language. Wikis are

often used to create collaborative websites and to power community websites" (Wikipedia-

Contributors "Wiki" par. 1). The first wiki (wikiwikiweb) was developed in 1994 by Ward

Cunningham who intended his version of the "WWW" as "a collaborative database, dedicated to

People, Projects and Patterns, in order to make the exchange of ideas between programmers

easier" (Wikipedia-Contributors "History of Wikis" par. 15). Utilizing Perl programming,[6]

Cunningham used the Hawaiian phrase "wiki-wiki," meaning "quick-quick," instead of calling

his user friendly platform the "quick-web," meaning quickly viewed and edited (ibid). Wikis,

however, did not gain public popularity until the introduction of *Wikipedia,* the free internet

encyclopedia that can be edited by anyone, founded by Jimmy Wales on 15 January, 2001

(Wikipedia-Contributors "History of Wikipedia" par. 5).

Wiki texts are considered the most democratic mode of web based text creation because

anyone with a computer and internet access can create, post, comment on, or edit a wikitext.

This "democratic" mode of text creation can be understood in its "participatory" or

"representational" forms.   With a wiki "participatory" platform, anyone who chooses can post,

create, and edit a wikitext. Thus, breadth and depth of knowledge and personal/political intent

does not determine right to authorship or agency. A person with no knowledge regarding a

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[5] *Rhetoric and Composition* has the distinction of being awarded the position of "Featured Book" by the *Wikibook* community: http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Rhetoric_and_Composition.

[6] "Perl" is a program language developed by Larry Wall and introduced in 1984. What makes Perl ideal for wikis is the fact that its text processes do not have limits on data lengths (Wikipedia-Contributors, Perl, 4 June, 2008, Electronic, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Perl&oldid=217032879 4 June 2008.).

specific subject, such as a wiki article on 18th century literature, can just as easily post or edit an

article as, say, a professor who holds a Ph.D. on the subject. If information is incorrect and

lacking support to validate claims, the wiki community of writers and enthusiasts rely on each

other to "police" and to re-edit texts that are considered inaccurate or not supported. However,

as the wiki became more fashionable, and the platform was used more frequently because of the

popularity of *Wikipedia*, a more "representational" approach was adopted with many wikis

where edits and articles had to be approved through a type of "peer review" process. As the

Academic Publishing Wiki explains the process, the "first author of an article can designate an

article as being available for the formal peer review process by appending the [peer review]

template to the article" (Academic-Publishing-Wiki-Contributors par. 3).

　　Finally, it is helpful to note the relationship between wiki and the academic community.

Like the rest of the internet community, academia has embraced wiki culture, albeit at a slower

pace. At the core of this slow embrace is the problem of community creation, editing, agency,

and authenticity/factuality. As more students have looked to *Wikipedia* for a source of

information, there has been a valid concern regarding accuracy of information, lack of peer

review regarding information, and, just as importantly, questions of subjectivity with wikis.

Since *Wikipedia* (and other wikitexts) allows anonymous editing and creation of entries, there is

no way, until recently,[7] to validate where information is coming from, whether that information

is accurate and, whether credit has been given to the original author (questions of plagiarism).

Regardless, the wiki platform is being utilized by the academic community in a variety of ways

including: the Academic Job Search, Post-Doctorate Searches in the Humanities and Social

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[7] Internet sites such as WikiScanner (http://wikiscanner.virgil.gr/) identify the URLs of Wikipedia editors, revealing, at least, the companies and locations of many editors. This new technology has uncovered the authorship/editorship of the US Government, Newspapers, Political Campaigns, and the like, revealing possible "intent" behind "agency."

Sciences, Academic Journals and Publishing, and now, an Academic Textbook ("Rhetoric and

Composition: A Guide for the College Writer").

　　　Rhetoric and Composition: A Guide for the College Writer is currently divided up into

four main units: Stages of the Writing Process, Writing Applications, Advanced Topics, a

Writer's and a Teacher's Handbook. Unit 1 examines what it means to be a "good writer," the

writing process from planning, invention, collaboration, and researching, to drafting, editing,

rewriting and publishing. Although a collaboratively written project throughout,[8] the first

chapter introduces a fairly consistent casual voice to the text, which conveys an intimate

conversational feeling. Like other handbooks on rhetoric and writing, such as Lunsford and

Ruszkiewickz's *Everything's an Argument*, this wikitext also examines the origins of argument,

including Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but focuses more immediately on the praxis of writing. Part three

on "Researching," is a an excellent section where the authors' link ideas such as crafting an

argument to engaging a specific audience, to understanding that the sources chosen also help

form and inform your audience (Barton et al. "Research"). However, Unit 1 also demonstrates

how free access to authorship can disrupt a unified "voice" of a book. Part five, "Editing,"

includes a section on Richard Lanham's *Analyzing Prose* which reads more like a literary review

than an instructional tool for undergraduate writing.

　　　Unit 2, "Writing Applications," is an exceptionally helpful section, examining the

different styles of writing: Descriptive, Narrative, Exposition, Evaluation and Argument

composition. First, however, the authors include a useful section on how to decode writing

assignments by being able to define and identify benchmark terminology such as:

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[8] Although a collaborative project, Matthew Barton wrote a great deal of the original text, leaving intentional gaps
for his students to fill and refine. The book, however, has grown from this point to included sections not originally
conceived.

"address/cover," "compare/contrast," "defend/justify," "illustrate," "list/enumerate," and other

commonly used terms. The vocabulary overview is followed by detailed sections on writing

styles, listed above, offering an overview on the style being examined, a how-to/step-by-step

approach to the style that is both specific in terms of direction, but loose enough in its approach

as to encourage the student room for creativity. Directions in these sections include the

consideration of word use, imagery, and essay construction examples regarding the form of

introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs.   Instructors will find helpful an insistence

regarding the importance of a thesis statement, its use, construction, and placement in a text.

Each style section is concluded by an example essay, and external internet links that offer further

information. Although the sample essays are helpful, especially the evaluation and argument

examples, students should be advised not to take these illustrations as the definitive word on the

style.

        "Advanced Topics" offers an in-depth look at writing for the humanities, the sciences,

business, oral presentations, and rhetorical analysis. There is also a section on writing an

annotated bibliography. Unlike the first two units of this work, Unit 3 starts out strong and then

tends to become disjointed. The strongest segments are on writing for the humanities, sciences,

business, and oral presentations—all of which rely on a consistent structure and a unified vision

of the material being covered, including the type of writing used in the disciplines (interpretive,

analytical, etc.), typical structure for the papers or speech, and external resources. Those

entering the working world will find the section on business very helpful, since it contains

information regarding letters of application, follow-up thank you letters, and resume writing.

After the section on "Oral Presentations," however, there is a general lack coherency. The later

added section on "Rhetorical Analysis" is short and misplaced within the book. The authors of

this added section would have served the work better by placing it in Unit 2, after the

introduction. Further, the segment on writing the "Annotated Bibliography" is very helpful,

covering both APA and MLA style, but again seems misplaced in the work as a whole.

The *Rhetoric and Composition* Wikibook currently concludes with the "Writer's" and

"Teacher's" Handbooks. As pointed out by Barton in the comment area of the wiki, "we don't

want to make grammarians out of people. Instead, they need to know just enough to stop from

doing things that will detract from their ethos as writers" (Barton par 1). For the most part, the

"Writer's Handbook" accomplishes this task nicely with sections discussing grammar, parts of

speech, type of sentences, the active versus passive voice, the mechanics of writing, as well as

common errors in writing and how to cite sources. The section on grammar offers a typical

overview regarding the parts of speech, sentence structure, and the difference between an active

and passive voice in composition. More helpful for undergraduate college students will be the

chapter on mechanics that simply, but specifically, explains punctuation, followed by common

misuses and errors, such as subject and verb agreements and sentence fragments. Unfortunately,

the important final section on citations is not fully completed, documenting only the MLA style

and, as of yet, it does not discuss in-text citations. The final chapter, "Teacher's Handbook," is

the publication's weakest and most incomplete at this point in time. The hope is that it will be

adopted and completed by instructors of composition and rhetoric.

As a whole, the current work is uneven when considered in the light of traditionally

published textbooks; however, this should not detract from the work, nor should it keep

instructors and students from utilizing this important resource. It must be remembered that like

all wikibooks, *Rhetoric and Composition: A Guide for the College Writer* is a communal work in

progress that is continuously being added to, revised, and edited. No longer a class project, the

Rhetoric and Composition wiki has been adopted by several different writers, all striving to

polish an already well conceived text. As such, it can be an excellent resource for college

instructors and students, as long as those utilizing the wikitext also contribute to the self-

regulating system of upholding the integrity of the work by policing attempts at text

vandalization, and by giving back to the text through creation and editing.

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In *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*, Adam Banks contributes significantly to scholarship

at the intersections of literacy, technical communication, and African American rhetoric. He

argues that African Americans have always had to struggle for technological access, and that,

subsequently, an African American rhetoric of what he calls "transformative access" can add

substantially to current conversations about technology and access. Banks focuses on the rhetoric

of the "digital divide" to point out the limitations of previous and currents conversations about

access, conversations that more often than not end up reverting to binaries—technology provides

access or technological access is hindered—rather than moving toward a fuller understanding of

the challenges surrounding issues of access and technology. For Banks, transformative

technological access moves beyond the rhetoric of access as just consumption and instead allows

for equity in the realm of technological production and ownership. A rhetoric that emphasizes a

Black digital ethos, he argues, is the vehicle for moving both cultural and academic

conversations in this direction: "mastery of individual technological tools and more general

theoretical awareness comes together in what I argue needs to become a Black digital ethos—a

set of attitudes, knowledges, expectations, and commitments that we need to develop and teach

and bring to our engagement with things technological" (p. 47-49).

In positing a Black digital ethos, Banks opens up the realm of African American rhetoric

and points to an important yet missing conversation in technical communication scholarship,

discussions of race. In "Oakland, the Word, and The Divide: How We All Missed The Moment,"

Banks provides a critique of current conversations in disciplinary circles including composition

and rhetoric, technical communication, and computers and writing. He points out that while

national conversations during the 1990s focused on what was to become known as the digital

divide, which he defines as "a concept to acknowledge the systematic differences in technology access that African Americans, other racial minorities and those in rural areas experienced" (12), English departments were once again debating Ebonics while questions of race and technological access were more or less ignored there and elsewhere in the academy. Furthermore, the emphasis on an oral rhetorical tradition, compiled with the stereotype that African Americans "just don't 'do' science and technology" (p. 21), has led to little serious attention to technology discussion even among the scholarship of African American rhetoric. For Banks, however, technological access should be "the key ethical issue that must drive all of our conversations about technologies and their relationship to written communication" (p. 20).

Banks calls on his audience to recognize the digital divide as a "rhetorical problem" that reduces the problem of access to an issue only of "connectivity" to computers or the web rather than a recognition of the significant systematic and material inequalities that exist. In his critique of current conversations about access, he argues that we need to recognize issues of access as so much more than just connectivity. "Beyond the tools themselves," he writes, "meaningful access requires users, individually and collectively, to be able to use, critique, resist, design, and change technologies in ways that are relevant to their lives and needs" (p. 41). Banks keenly observes the need for multiple levels of access to exist if change, and thus true access, is to actually occur. To complicate our limited understandings of access, he identifies four kinds of access that need to be addressed: material access (ownership and/or proximity in order for use to occur), functional access (the knowledge and skills needed in order to use technology once material access is realized), experiential access (meaningful and relevant use), and critical access (the ability to question and "resist" technology when needed (p. 41-42). Certainly, one of the most insightful contributions Banks offers with this text, these levels of access provide a useful

theoretical framework for repositioning conversations about access in both educational and

public debates.

In remaining chapters, Banks offers critiques of exclusionary technological structures as

well as examples of how African Americana might move toward transformative access via a

Black digital ethos. He begins with a discussion of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X,

suggesting that both civil rights orators use a Black digital ethos to further the cause of African

American struggle in the 1960s. In "Taking Black Technology Use Seriously: African American

Discursive traditions in the Digital Underground," he performs a contemporary analysis of

African American discourse patterns on the Internet site BlackPlanet. He demonstrates how

African Americans users access BlackPlanet in meaningful ways, resisting the ways in which

cyberspace has developed as a White cultural construct. Both chapters impress upon readers the

ways in which, as Banks reminds us, African American struggle has always come up against

issues of technology and how African Americans, therefore, have always had to manipulate it

and appropriate technology in order to claim meaningful access.

The next chapter, "Rewriting Racist Code: The Black Jeremiad as Countertechnology in

Critical Race Theory" introduces the American legal system as a technological construct. Banks

argues for the jeremiad as a rhetorical form that disrupts the racist discursive conventions of our

legal system. He cites use of the Black jeremiad by Harvard law professor Derrick Bell in *And

We Are Not Saved* as an example of one such disruption, suggesting that "form is every bit as

important a site of protest as content" (p. 104) when it comes to enacting transformation. While I

would have liked less discussion of Bell's particular use of the jeremiad and more discussion as

to how this rhetorical form might be used to counter other racist technologies and make

arguments for access, I appreciate how Banks challenges our assumptions concerning what

constitutes technology in this chapter. In foregrounding legal discourse as a technology, he

makes transparent the relationship between language and knowledge—that is, that language

shapes and structures how we come to know.

Chapter six, "Through this Hell Into Freedom: Black Architects, Slave Quilters, and an

African American Rhetoric of Design," furthers his attention to form with a discussion of visual

rhetoric and design. As important as it is to critique exclusionary technological constructs, the

struggle for meaningful access also demands equity in the realm of design and policy making,

Banks point out. Demonstrating that access is a rhetorical problem as much as it is a material

one, he puts forth design as an important rhetorical element that can assist in realizing access for

marginalized groups. In doing so, he etches an African American rhetoric of design that pulls

from African American architecture and Black quilters. With these two examples of African

American design, Banks points to a tradition of design in African American culture, a legacy of

design that historically provided—and, he argues can continue to provide—avenues toward

transformative access for African Americans. Banks closes his book with a call to reconsider the

role of technology within the history of African American rhetoric. Specifically, he argues for a

digitalization of the African American tradition, extended analysis of racial constructs online, a

recognition of technological access as a major trope within African American rhetoric, and an

acknowledgement of the importance of design within African American rhetoric.

Banks' analysis deftly illustrates how African Americans have historically engaged issues

of technology, making a compelling argument for the importance of conceiving a technological

African American rhetoric. In doing so, he successfully demonstrates that to put forward the

Black experience as tied to technological struggle is not to essentialize Black identity; instead

such group identification is essential for transformation to happen. And while his main purpose

is toward reshaping the African American rhetorical tradition, his theorizing on access provides a

necessary complication to broader debates concerning the value of technology, particularly in

light of recent arguments that link technology and literacy to the rise of the knowledge economy.