

The Greatest Composition Manual Never Made

SOGC

English 700 – Remix Final Project

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1) Goals and Performance of the Remix:

Our linked Tumblr project seeks to perform, as well as to explore, the role of circulation in composition studies as articulated in two essays: John Trimbur's "Composition and the Circulation of Writing" and Kathleen Yancy's "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." We hope to demonstrate the circularity of composition as well as composition as circulation, thereby un-circumscribing the process of composition from the act of writing.

Meta-Critique:

The assignment asks us to "remix" at least one of the two *CCC* articles and in doing so "build upon, extend, and reimagine the article in a meaningful way." We believe that the Tumblr composition manual and branching composer Tumblrs accomplish this in two ways. First, we argue that Tumblr formally reproduces, or we might say re-circulates, Yancy and Trimbur's arguments regarding the composition process. Yancy describes the circulation of the composition process as social, formal, spatial, and temporal: "Texts circulate: they move across contexts, between media, across time. Writers compose in the context of other writers and thinkers and speakers. They imitate them directly and indirectly; they quote them, write in direct reference to them, paraphrase them, and frame their own work in these contexts" (Yancy 312). Circulation also happens at the level of the composer through what Charles Bazerman and David Russell call activity theory. Circulation in this sense is in "the organization of activities that people find the needs, stances, interactions, tasks that orient their attention toward texts they write and read" (Bazerman & Russell qtd. in Yancy 312). Finally, Trimbur uses the concept of circulation to complicate the consumption of compositions. By reading compositions as commodities with use and exchange values, Trimbur argues that the consumption of a composition is not the end point of the life of the text as commodity, but part of the circulatory nature of composition. Like Yancy, he suggests that composition may be circulation.

The Tumblr form responds to these concepts in a few different ways. The reblogging of other posts is simultaneously a consumption of another text and the creation of a new one, thereby performing circulation as Trimbur articulates it. When a post is reblogged within a new composition, the relogger/blogger has the option to select which elements of the original composition she would like to display in her post. In this way, the composer can say something about how the consumption of another text affected her own composing process. Tumblr uses a frame-like visual system to juxtapose the consumed composition against the new composition, therefore demonstrating the composer's reading or consumptive praxis visually. The reader (or new consumer) of this reblog composition can also "drill down" through the reblog composition to the source composition because the quoted composition is also always a link. In this way, the

hyperlink represents the way compositions are also always circulation by embedding both the source composition and the ability to perform circulation within the actual composition itself.

Additionally, the number of citations (or “notes”) that the post receives is tallied, as well as the number of times a post has been “liked.” Tumblr also records the time at which a composition is posted or reposted so that it would be possible to actually create a chronology of the circulation of each post. This information is displayed alongside the text in both its original context and when it is reposted. In this way, some quantification of the “use value” and “exchange value” of the text is always visible to readers. Of course, counting is only one way to access these values. Nevertheless, Tumblr’s emphasis on keeping a highly visual record of the composition’s movement through a variety of spaces and over time lends itself to our project in that it clearly demonstrates in a performative, interactive way the patterns and physics of circulation within, or as, compositions. Finally, the tagging system allows composers to make visible their “organization of activities” that informed their composition and likewise gives their readers a lens through which to consume and possibly circulate the composition.

The choice of framing our hub-blog as a composition manual and the branching blogs as individual composers allowed us to at once critique the genre of the manual for restricting the plasticity, and disguising the circularity, of composition by privileging the act of writing and the authoritative relationship between the educator/text and the composer. By allowing our “prompts” to veer toward the zany, hyperbolic, and ridiculous, but still claiming a position within the manual genre, we suggest that there is actually little difference between the tasks that the hub-blog asks composers to perform and more traditional composition exercises. However, because the composition manual is written as a blog and situated in the intensely circulatory forms of Tumblr described above, the form of the manual undermines its top-down, dyadic relationship with the composer. In this way, the composition manual is never “made,” but always making, always in circulation with a diverse and accidental peer group.

Audiences:

When we decided to build our project on Tumblr, we realized that putting our remix live on the internet would give it two simultaneous audiences. The intended audience of the assignment was the composition-rhetoric community. From planning to execution, the fact that the project would have to be presented to our class and also graded by our professor was always at the back of our minds, influencing decisions about things like aesthetics and legibility. Less influential but still in on our minds was the larger field of composition studies. We knew that the end goal was to put our remix on the wiki page, and we also wanted to contribute to the larger conversation of the field as interlocutors, and so we also had to make sure that our project ultimately had something original to say.

The second audience was more unintended, in that we only realized we would have them as an audience when we created our Tumblrs. As a social media platform, Tumblr gave us internet audiences who were largely not involved with composition studies (we diligently tagged many of our posts with "composition" or "rhetoric," but no actual composition blogs interacted with us, likely because Tumblr is not a prominent place for composition pedagogues to hang out in the first place, unlike how it's the natural habitat of One Direction fans). The internet added an

element of unpredictability, as we had much less control over choosing or even knowing the audience. As we added more posts to the main blog, the different subjects and tags also gave us various sub-audiences. For example, our deliberate courting of One Direction fans gave us followers who were specifically interested in only that post, while our marriage equality post gave us attention from users interested in LGBT rights, and those two sub-audiences never necessarily overlapped. In this context, unlike with the composition studies audience, it was less about catering to what we thought the audience wanted and more about randomly developing audiences who were not interested in what we thought were our intended goals.

2) Choices and Limits:

Rhetorical Choices:

We chose an online format because we wanted both to have a degree of customization and for the project to be attractive and engaging. We chose to go with Tumblr because we wanted medium that was self-reflexive in order to make an argument through both form and content. It was important to us to be able to insert other compositions within our own composition because we believed the simultaneous visual presence of the consumed composition and the new composition would offer a visually persuasive means of making an argument for the role of consumption in composition. We wanted our project to have an aspect of playfulness, both for subversive purposes and as a way of engaging our audiences, and so chose a medium that was able to literalize the circulatory aspects of Yancey and Trimbur's theses in a dynamic way. We chose to have four branching blogs attached to the hub-blog in order to be sure that we would have enough posts to demonstrate the circulatory process. We decided that although we would try to attract other blogs through our tagging, that we could not count on strangers to accumulate enough evidence for our argument. Lastly, because anyone can join in the act of composition and circulation, we valued the way that Tumblr allowed our audiences to be persuaded by actually performing our argument through their own compositions.

In terms of our presentation, we chose Powerpoint because it gives us the ability to compress the circulatory network into a single dramatic event that explains and entertains. We wanted a visual prop that wouldn't bore and gave a clear, but dynamic, example of how the project worked.

Rhetorical Limits:

When we opted for Tumblr, we were limited by the availability of layouts and the rhetorical success of those pre-made layouts. No one in the group had the technological skills to design our own layouts and we decided that we wouldn't pay for sleeker, more attractive layouts out of sensitivity to the graduate student budget. Because of these factors, we were limited to the rhetorical prowess of the free layouts. We were also restricted by the generic categories of Tumblr posts (text, photo, quote, link, audio, video). The format of each category limits the visuality of the post, so, for example a video can't be embedded in a text post but only linked.

Material Choices:

The Tumblr allows us to make use of strangers as resources and participants and gives us access to social groups that we may or may not be aware of or think relevant to composition studies. As a platform for composition, Tumblr allowed us to engage with groups and activities that we wouldn't ordinarily have considered. In other words, as a medium it allowed us to consciously integrate a random or surprise factor into the project and also make gestures to ways that compositions could be customized by someone from a totally disparate social scene. The fact that Tumblr is a free site (unless you opt to pay for a layout) and internet access is free and available through public libraries, as well as other sources, allowed us to suggest that this project would be one open to a variety of socio-economic positions. That the Tumblr site is relatively intuitive and, though customizable, offers default options so that your blog is immediately functional, suggests that even if digital literacy was an issue for a composer, the Tumblr site could work as a learning tool—both in terms of digital literacy and as a course in composition practices. In fact, two of the four group members had never used Tumblr before or had a blog but found that they could navigate the site and customize their individual blogs to their liking after experimenting and reading through other Tumblrs. The stakes of Tumblr are low because a blog begins as more or less anonymous and the content of the blog can always be edited. In this way, we were able to demonstrate an argument for alternatives to print-based and essayistic notions of composition and justification for composing in digital spaces through, as James Gee would say, good learning practices.

Material Limits:

We were, of course, constrained by the amount of time we had to complete the assignment. We believe that if we were able to grow the site over a longer period of time, allowing us to become more knowledgeable about successful tagging and reblogging practices that encourage a broader circulation of compositions, then we could have demonstrated even more emphatically the ways in which the composing process is mobile and imaginative. We were also limited by our knowledge of popular composition practices within the genre and had to learn these as we went along.

In terms of our presentation, we were again limited by our knowledge of technology. We chose Powerpoint and Jing as presentation formats (after suggestions by Steele Wagstaff in the Design Lab) because they allowed us to work with the skills that we already possessed but also allowed for a large degree of creative freedom.

Methodological Choices:

As written above, after reading the two articles to be remixed, what stood out to us was not either of the articles as a whole, but rather the theme of circulation across both of them. We decided in the planning stages that we wanted to make circulation either the focus of the project's content or its form, but ideally we wanted to do both. Our choice to attempt to make something that talked about circulation while also foregrounding its own circulation led us to Tumblr, which is a medium built around the idea of tracing circulations. From our logged in view of our timeline, we could see who was following or reblogging us, laid out chronologically; from each

entry's "notes", anyone could see who reblogged or 'liked' us, also laid out chronologically. Tumblr's posting interface also allowed us to execute the spirit of our original ideas even though we lacked the means to do all of them—instead of building a Rube Goldberg machine, for example, we could embed a video of a working one into a text post explaining how a composition project using one would work. We could also add hyperlinks, have conversations with each other, and reblog each other, which visually and materially emphasized our project's own circulation around the internet.

We chose the overarching framework of the composition manual because we wanted to reflect what the Yancey and Trimbur articles were talking about. Unlike a printed manual or handbook, a manual hosted on Tumblr allowed a higher level of interactivity and co-creation. When we actually did some of the suggested activities, we could make a post that would actually show up as a response to the original post, and indeed a conversation could follow where another group member could reblog someone else's reblog and add further comments. The idea of the "manual" was also a tongue-in-cheek critique of traditional composition handbooks with very staid exercises that not only did not explore multi-modality, but also did not challenge students to do anything unexpected or use all of their available means of persuasion.

Methodological Limits:

Our methods were limited by the precepts of the assignment and by the structure of working in a group. We wanted to capitalize on everybody's skills, utilizing each individual member's unique strengths and compensating for her areas of weakness. We had to discard certain ideas that were unfeasible due to these strengths and weaknesses, or due to time and budget constraints. Interactive flowcharts or physical photo collages were some ideas that were suggested at the beginning that had to be scrapped because of our lack of technological expertise in flowchart software and our lack of time (and probably money for materials) meant we were unsure that we could create something as aesthetically polished if we made a physical project rather than a digital one. Even with the Tumblr, we were each limited by our individual reference points and how well we understood Tumblr culture. Some members were limited to certain tagging or interaction practices depending on their experience with internet memes and slang.

Technological Choices:

We chose to use Tumblr because of all the platforms we could think of, it was the most obviously self-reflexive and engaged with its own circulation. The fact that it is hosted on the live internet was also a factor in our choice, because it allows for synchronicity in our creative practice. We could imagine and execute our project at the same time from our different places (at home, at school, at the library, in a 24-hour coffee shop struggling not to cry as deadlines approach ominously, etc.), which allowed us to do a lot in the time we had. As a technology, it embodied a lot of the things we were wanted in our rhetorical, material, and methodological approaches.

Technological Limits:

Again, time was an obvious constraint, which limited us to technologies that we either already knew or could learn quickly. For example, we would not be able to learn enough electrical engineering or basic building skills to build the kind of fancy Rube Goldberg machine we envisioned in time for the assignment's deadline. Something on the computer seemed the most obvious, as basic computer skills was common ground between all of us as graduate students. Being limited to existing or easily-learned technological skills also influenced our choice of Tumblr as a platform, because it gave us the most 'bang for our buck' in terms of the ratio between customizability/aesthetic pleasantness and ease of use/intuitive navigation.

3) Why “The Greatest Composition Manual Never Made”? The Composition Manual That Could Have Been...

In the end, we chose a project that allowed us to enact many of the projects that we came up with in our original brainstorming process. We opted for a medium and concept in which we could perform a variety of different compositions without having to commit the time, labor, and money that each might require if carried out literally. Some of these original ideas included: creating a series of “Kodak moments”; using disposable, digital, toy cameras, scanners, photocopiers, and screenshots, to capture images and circulate them; meme generation; collage; a production of paratexts; “tech-tonic” shift; an interactive flow chart; a hypertext; performance art; and a Rube Goldberg machine. In the end, the online “composition manual” let us integrate these ideas in different forms, as well as new ideas that we came up with along the way, while also ironizing theories of compositional process that focus on a single product rather than the material, unexpected, and imaginative compositional process that suggests that there are many “products” along the way to that eventual singular “work.”

The one project that we conceptually left by the wayside was the idea of this manual being a physical book. The limitations of enacting this project were multiple: cost, its ability to circulate, the problem of a lack of examples of the composition prompts in action, the sense of linearity that a bound book can connote, and the restrictions to ways that we could demonstrate the consumption of texts. However, had we the time, money, and social network to distribute a bound book and have folks outside our peer group participate in interpreting these composition prompts, then we could have made a comparative argument about the benefits and limitations of print versus digital forms. We would also have the benefit of in-person human interaction and synchronic dialogue, which would have produced totally different kinds of compositions. In many ways, this bound book would have offered composers many more options for ways to circulate their texts, since Tumblr limits posts to the categories of text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio, and video.

Overall, however, considering the material constraints of the assignment, we're happy with our choice of online composition manual. We believe that it succeeds in remixing both Yancy and Trimbur's concepts of circulation formally as well as in terms of content. The cooperative performance between form and content is especially important to the concept of a remix because, in our interpretation, the remix must reframe as well as reimagine the spirit of the original composition(s).

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