

Episode 113: Crystal VanKooten

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Crystal VanKooten talks about digital media and composing with videos in first-year writing, podcasts and audio production, and digital rhetoric composition as a methodology.

Crystal VanKooten is an Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Oakland University in Rochester, MI, where she teaches courses in the Professional and Digital Writing major and in first-year writing and serves as co-managing editor of *The Journal for Undergraduate Multimedia Projects* (JUMP+). Dr. VanKooten's work focuses on digital media composition through engagement with how technologies shape composition practices, pedagogy, and research. Her digital book, *Transfer across Media: Using Digital Video in the Teaching of Writing*, is available from Computers and Composition Digital Press.

Crystal, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Your teaching and research interests focus on digital media and video composition, and I was hoping that we could talk about how you use media and video in first-year writing classes. Maybe you could talk more about or share a particular audio-visual assignment that you use?

CVK: Yeah, thank you so much. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to talk to you today and to be on the podcast. I guess my interest in teaching with video has always been intertwined with first-year writing. As a graduate student, I was teaching for first-year writing and doing a lot with video myself as an author, learning how to compose videos, and then also asking my students to do the same to compose with videos in the first-year writing classroom. I feel like as long as I've been studying this, teaching with video and writing and learning, I guess, learning the rhetoric of video and audio and visual texts have been all been intertwined for me. So, yeah, I'm happy to talk about how I do it now and sort of how I got there along the way over the past few years of studying this and working with students on this.

The way I teach first year writing now is I teach it as a process of inquiry and research. So the whole class is sort of meant to build, as students select a topic that they'd like to look into and inquire into, and then using all sorts of different resources, multimodal resources, and print resources to do research into their topic and then to learn how to communicate what they've researched, and perhaps in the end, an argument about their topic. I have them decide on what topic they would like to look into for a few weeks at the beginning of the semester. I feel like this is a really important part of writing classes that are based around inquiry is trying to figure out what you want to research, and as we all know from teaching students, sometimes they don't know what they want to research, and especially when you have an open topic option. Getting them to find something that they care about and want to write about and want to research is

really important. I try to offer that space for them. I think it's important for students to write and research about something that they really care about and want to select.

I provide that space and then we take some time to find the topics. They propose their topic to me once they've decided. I've done it several ways in first year writing where we put the multimodal project at the end of the semester. You often see that too with remediation assignments where students will research and write a paper, and then at the end of the semester, they'll do a remediation project. I've actually experimented with putting it lots of different places in the curriculum, putting the multimodal composition work in multiple places. I found that I like it best and it works really well for students if you don't put it at the very end if you try to weave in multimodal composition and multimodal research throughout the student's entire research and writing experience. So we do little things throughout the whole semester to get them introduced to what does writing with sound and writing with images entail. If I'm researching and I'm looking for media sources and multimodal resources, where do I look and what kinds of things am I looking for and how do those work with print sources that we might be more used to working with in the classroom.

But we do a big inquiry through video project, I guess, is the main big multimodal assignment that I do with first year writers. So we propose our research, we do some research and we do an annotated bibliography assignment. Then we do the inquiry through video project before we actually write any sort of academic standard research essay. So that's the big assignment that I do with students. As I said, for their annotated bibliography project, they do different kinds of research and I require them to find different kinds of sources. So they find some print sources, but then lots of different kinds of multimodal sources. I ask them to go to look for images and infographics and videos and podcasts. I hope that they can sort of survey the land of their topic when they're looking for those different kinds of sources. Then of course, some books and articles too. Then they have to decide which of those sources or they can go find others that they want to use to make their inquiry through video project.

SW: Are there particular platforms you encourage students to use for this video assignment? And are there certain skills or components of the production process that you emphasize as students do this work?

CVK: It's a fairly open assignment in that I want them to use their research and talk about their topic in video format. But I do encourage them to think about the different modes of expression that they choose to use in the video and how the modes of expression are working together to get the message that they want to get out there through the video. So I'll say, "What visual aspects are you usually want to put in the video? What linguistic aspects?" We use the five modes of expression from the New London Group. So there's linguistic, visual, oral, spatial, gestural modes of expression. Which of your media assets fall within this mode? Or they're not always just one mode, but this one is predominantly sound. So we have some sound we want to work with here, some music or some speaking. We have some visuals. We have some written language that we want to put in or spoken language. Then think about when we put this all together in the

video project, how does it work together to put a message out there to an audience or to audiences?

So sometimes, students have made some videos maybe, or maybe some students have never made a video before. So this is all new to them. How do you best put a video together? They've watched lots of videos and films in their life, but when you start making them, you really realize what goes into to creating a media product that has layers in it. There's lots going on when you even just have a visual and one sound. You have to put those two things together, you have to line them up, you have to decide what gets juxtaposed. When I see this, what do I hear at this moment? So we talk about things like cross modal juxtaposition where you can put different things, like a sound might align with the image, or maybe it doesn't. Maybe the image and the sound are doing different work in that moment, different rhetorical work. But you put them together in that way for a reason, whether they're supposed to work together or whether they're supposed to be sort of doing different things at that moment. So it's complicated. Usually with first year writers, you get a start on that stuff. You talked a little bit about it. They can do some really cool and awesome things with it.

SW: You teach a class called "Podcasting" at Oakland University. Do you mind talking more about this class and what you hope students learn through podcasts and sound and audio production?

CVK: I'm excited to talk about this class because I've always been very interested in sound and because I've done so much work with video, obviously sound is a huge part of what you do if you're composing on video. So when I got the opportunity to teach the podcasting class for the first time, I was excited to dive more into specifically the rhetoric of sound. The rhetoric of sound is sort of exploding as a subfield within our larger field of rhetoric and writing. There are so many folks now that are focusing on sound rhetoric and rhetoric of music and that kind of thing. There's lots of new cool things to read and listen to in our field, podcasts, obviously like this one that are exploding. There's so much going on that is great material for a class like this for podcasting. I was very excited that I got to teach this because I love to learn more about it as I go when I teach something like this. So when I teach podcasting for undergraduates, I want to introduce them to composing with sound and to the rhetoric of sound in our field of writing studies. That's one of my major goals.

I want them to listen to a lot of different types of audio stories and sound work that's out there, learn how to analyze it and think about it and talk and write about it in a way that's a little bit more specific than just I liked it or whatever. Then I want them to compose with sound. I think it's composing through media and through sound, you learn a lot about how the media and the medium works, but then also it causes new ways of thinking I think in you as a composer when you do those things. So thinking through music and thinking through juxtapositions of music and voice is really cool and an important experience for writers, I think, so.

Then there's a lot of traditional writing with podcasting too, a lot of scripting and planning and organizing and that kind of stuff. So those are all things we do in the podcasting class. Yeah. I have them do a couple of audio composition projects. The first one is an individual project where they tell an audio story that has to have an interview with it. So I want them to experience interviewing, recording the interview and everything that goes in with planning for that, and then actually using the interview to tell an audio story. I have them edit the interview and learn how to think about organizing it once you've recorded this raw interview and you ask questions in a certain order and they answer it in the order they answered. Well, sometimes you don't want to just publish it in that way. So how do you tell a story using those audio assets and reconstruct it, or put it together to tell the message that you want to tell. So that's their first one and they do it individually to practice all those things and start learning those things.

Then for the final project in podcasting, they do a three episode podcast series. I give them lots of freedom for how they want to do it. I want them to work together. So that's one thing that they have to do because most podcasts are not done individually. They're done in collaboration, in teams. I want them to get that experience. But they make their own teams. They pick what they want to make their episodes about and then they work together to do it.

So actually I taught podcasting in fall 2021, and we had a wonderful opportunity to work with the special collections in our library at Oakland University. So there is a collection in our library that's called the Pontiac Oral History Collection. It's a collection of 39 interviews that were recorded in the 1970s, actually, in Pontiac, Michigan, which is a neighboring community to Oakland University. They were recorded by an Oakland University employee who wanted to go out and record the stories of Black residents of Pontiac who had moved to Pontiac prior to the 1970s for work. So actually Pontiac was a big center of industry in the '30s and '40s, I think, and a lot of Black residents from the South actually migrated North, moved to Pontiac for work. She wanted to record their stories. She did on cassette tapes. Here they all are in a box in our special collections in the library. So with some collaborations through the Center for Public Humanities at Oakland University and the library, the Kresge Library, I learned about the collection and I thought, "Wow, this would be so wonderful if we could make some audio stories with this material."

There's six of the 39 interviews that have been digitized. So we actually work with the librarians and got permission to work within our course with the six digitized interviews. So one group of undergraduates from podcasting in the fall took on this project and made their three episode podcast series on the Pontiac Oral Histories. They were so wonderful. They did such a wonderful job. One of the cool and challenging aspects of the project was that the audio recordings they were working with are very old and we're recorded on cassette tapes, like I said, and the audio quality wasn't so great. They were a little bit hard to understand. There was lots of background noise in some of the interviews. The students were working with and strategizing how can we use this material, how can we make it accessible and understandable to the audiences that they envisioned for their podcast. It was a cool project.

SW: Crystal, let's talk about your research. In your 2016 article "Methods and Methodologies for Research in Digital Rhetoric," you observed digital rhetoricians and write about using digital composition as a methodology. Can you talk more about what it means to use digital composition as a methodology and how teachers and researchers might consider drawing on digital rhetoric to help them in their own teaching and through their own research practices?

CVK: Yes. Thank you for asking me this. I love to talk about methods and methodologies. So I, for my dissertation research when I was in graduate school, decided to record...well, so I was doing a classroom based study in first year writing on several classes that were doing digital video composition as part of their curriculum. I decided to collect data for the study in many ways. I visited classrooms and observed. I did interviews. I worked with the classes. I recorded a lot of what I observed and my interviews on video. At the time I thought I wanted to leave it open for however I might use that data, for analyzing it later, for presenting digital products, for composing with the material. So I thought, "I'll video record this, get the permission obviously to do so from the participants and see what I can do with it later." Little did I know, I was opening this door to this wild area where there isn't that much in our field written down where you can access it. People will give you advice, obviously. You can ask your mentors for advice, but you get advice that varies like crazy. Here's what I did. Here's what I did. Do this. Don't do that. Use a pseudonym. Don't use a pseudonym ever. It's crazy.

I was learning a lot on the fly when I was in graduate school and then thinking, "What am I doing? Why am I doing this? Why did I collect so much video data that now I have to learn how to use it and what to do with it?" But it's been wonderful along the way. I will say, it's shaped me as a researcher. I am a digital researcher. I use video as my method and my methodology. It has shaped the way that I think about data and my findings. I've come to conclusions in my research, because I was working with video data and was doing video editing as a method, that I don't think I would've arrived at if I was just looking at written transcripts of the material and writing about it.

In our field writing as a mode of thinking is kind of an established concept. I think the same applies for multimodal composition. It's a mode of thinking that is different than linguistic writing. It's not better or worse, but it provides different insight. I think when you're listening again and again to participants speak, or when you're juxtaposing what a participant said three years ago with what they said a year ago, in time in the video, you can see them back-to-back or you're deciding what to put together. Should I put this clip from this interview next to this piece that I observed and video recorded over here? What does putting those together let me to see and hear about what's actually going on with the student learning? I found that video as a method and methodology really just opened up more places where I could look for learning from students as I was looking in my study.

Then my digital book came out a couple years ago in 2020. I was so just happy that I could publish a lot of the video work that I had been doing. Video has been a big part of my own process as a researcher, as I go through the data and as I code and analyze things, but it's also a

method I think we can use for data presentation. You can put things out there in your publications in different ways if you use more than just the written word. So, so many of our journals and presses now have the ability to publish these kinds of multimodal texts. Even journals that don't really specialize in that or have a lot of digital texts that they publish, many of them have an option, if you want to have a video, you can have a video in there, things like that. I'm so grateful that my book is a digital book, that there's lots of video material in there that people can see and hear and read the experiences of the participants in my research. So that is really valuable to me.

SW: This is my last question. What are some key affordances to using and working with digital technologies in and through research?

CVK: There's lots of affordances of using video and lots of challenges as well. One of the affordances is that there's many pieces and parts of data that are captured and recorded when you're using something like video compared to something like handwritten notes or something like that. So you can see the participant in the video recording. You can hear them. You can see how they move their body when they're speaking. You can hear elements of their voice that maybe you could transcribe, but you get, I guess, more data at once when you're hearing it.

I was able to do some analysis, for example, on some interview material that I did with first year writing students on how they were moving their hands while they were talking to me about certain topics, and do some thinking about, okay, they said this, these words came out of their mouth, and then they moved their hands like this and their body was positioned like this. It isn't like, okay, now I know what this means exactly, but there's more data there for me to think about. Did they look nervous when they moved their hand like that, but then their voice didn't sound nervous? Then I also was experimenting with recording more in interviews. So when I first did interviews when I was in graduate school, I used one video camera. When I moved into the second phase of my large study on first year writing, I decided to use two video cameras in interviews. One was focused on the participant that was speaking and then one was sort of back to get the whole room and me as the interviewer in the shot.

I really wanted that because I wanted to be able to think about and analyze interactions more, how me as the interviewer or how I was part of the knowledge making in the interview moment and how I asked the question like this, here's how I looked and how I moved my body. Here's the participant and how they moved their body and responded and said. I don't think all that information is always necessary, or sometimes not useful, but sometimes it is in a key moment. Or when you want to sort of take a step back and look at the entire moment of the interview and think about more specifically what was going on there.

So that's some, I guess, some affordances maybe in an interview space when you're using something like video recording. I also think when you're analyzing data, and this is later on in the research process, maybe after you've done interviews or recordings and then you're analyzing

them in a video editor, I think I mentioned this before, but for me it taps into different forms of knowledge making in my brain.

I'm not sure if I have the language to really describe exactly what's going on, but when I'm writing and I'm writing sentences and words, I'm thinking in a certain way and that helps me to think sometimes. You don't know what you think about something until you write it out, but then when I'm video editing, it's a similar moment of thinking through the video editing. So what do I want to put together in this moment? Then in video editing, maybe even more so than alphabetic writing, I find myself replaying clips many, many times. So if you're trying to maybe put two or three things together in a video editor, you do it and then you replay it and you listen to it and you watch it. Then you think, "Oh, not quite right." You adjust this little thing and then you replay it again. So in a way, the video editor, at least for me, forces me to do the kind of recursive writing process that we all want our writing students to do and want ourselves to do when we're doing our own writing. You're doing it sort of many, many times in the moment.

I'm sure we do this with words and sentences as well as we write them down. But it's very obvious to me in a video editor, as I try to put something together and make it perfect and then watch it and watch it and watch it, I kind of sometimes memorize the cadence of someone speaking a certain sentence because I've listened to it so many times. So that's an affordance too. You get into the data, you hear it and you see it again and again and again.

SW: Thanks, Crystal. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.