

Episode 144: Jacob D. Richter

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, Jacob D. Richter talks about participatory counter-narratives, multimodality and teaching composition, digital tools and technologies, collaborative learning, and being a visiting assistant professor.

Dr. Jacob. D. Richter is a visiting assistant professor of technical communication at Georgia Institute of Technology. His research on composition pedagogy, writing and networked environments, digital rhetoric and social media's utility for education has appeared in college composition and communication, computers and composition, convergence, prompt and exchanges. He teaches first-tier composition, technical communication, business communication, and other upper division writing courses.

Jacob, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: In your College Composition and Communication article, "Participatory Counter-Narratives, Geocomposition, Public Memory, and the Sounding of Hybrid Place/Space." You write about public memory and social justice, and you introduce, "participatory counter-narratives." Do you mind defining participatory counter-narratives and how this might help teachers reconceive teaching and research?

JDR: Yeah, participatory counter-narratives are a mouthful, aren't they? But yeah, so this project arose in a graduate course at Clemson University where I did my PhD. It was Jordan Frith's Mobile and Locative Media Course, and I, as a compositionist through and through, with a background in rhetoric and composition, very much tried to find parallels between mobile and locative media and my interest in multimodal composition, and particularly in social justice and opportunities for thinking about diversity and equity and inclusion in my classes. So that's where the project originally came from, of course, taking participatory from a Henry Jenkins like Sarah Royall writes about participatory composition really eloquently. But anyways, yeah, so the idea for participatory counter-narratives arose from my thinking really about how to help students in composition courses to intervene. I really like that word, intervene. How to intervene in their local public memory, in their local communities with the help of digital tools, in my case, a collaboratively produced GIS audio tour.

But anyway, so just as a brief definition, participatory counter-narratives ask students to take an active role in using participatory media, such as like I use Audacity and then the free GIS audio tour, mapping platform, Geotourist. In an attempt to articulate a counter-narrative that's aligned with social justice or equity in some way, oftentimes concerning a place, and particularly places that will commonly get ignored in dominant tellings about an area or a community. So anyways, participatory counter-narratives, I would slightly more complexly define them as meaningful interventions in the places that shape our communities, our histories and our pedagogies. But really it's really looking at how rhetoric, and geography, and public memory and place can all be

approached in an interventionist way within the confines of a first year completion course. So they really understand public memory and in a local place, a local context as constructed, produced, and enacted very actively, but also passively through the stories that we tell, and also thinks about how that sort of public memory can be strategically reconceived through maps or through mapping of university campuses, in particular within first year composition courses. So anyways, they intervene in local public memory to articulate counter narratives of a place or of a community ultimately using participatory digital tools. So anyways, in my classes in first year composition, I ask students to use say like Audacity and Geotourist to intervene in dominant local stories, which for me at Clemson University at the time doing my PhD, was mostly about athletics, mostly about football, about athletic success, and generally otherwise about historical white men. And instead we focused on articulating a counter narrative that foregrounded either Clemson's history with race is an institution that was really late to admit their first Black student as well as their first female student.

So we talked about really race and gender justice and connected them to local places and monuments on campus, like say, particular buildings like Old Main or Tillman Hall on Clemson's campus, as well as a local Confederate monument, maybe three or four miles from campus. But basically, I had students write out a counter narrative. I had them record it for an episode of a audio tour, and then we spliced those audio tour episodes together into the actual audio tour in the Geotourist application that people can access on their smartphones, and basically attached each student produced episode of the audio tour to a geographical place around campus that people could walk to or go to physically within the world, and then hear a counter narrative.

SW: In that article, you talk about the importance of multimodality and how sound, audio, radio, and podcasts "convey stories about particular people, places, and events." Can you talk more about the affordances of these mediums and their value in composition classes? In your article, you talk about an audio tour project.

JDR: Yeah, yeah. So really, I guess unsurprisingly, I think I find tremendous potential and really excitement and enthusiasm for multimodality in composition, and especially for sound-based compositions like podcast or in my case, audio tours. So really my interest in these topics is primarily concerned with opportunities for creation of what I would describe as public humanities projects in composition, especially those that help students to take a more active role, you might say, in engaging in public memory in their local communities. So very much, generally speaking, very positive responses from students. There are interesting fun projects where students actually do things in the world, and so I think that's something that composition as a discipline has always been pretty good about foregrounding and prioritizing, and I think that's something that I definitely have learned from while also incorporating sound and multimedia. So I very much view multimodality really in public humanities projects like the one that I wrote about in C's. I really view them as opportunities to do something in composition courses. I really view them as actions and as verbs, you might say. So anyways, I suppose one illustrative thing that I like to talk about with my students is I like to talk about interventions as being really crucial both to multimodal participatory projects that engage public memory, but then also to the larger work of writing and rhetoric that's actually engaged with the world that's socially engaged. Generally speaking, with multimodal projects, my goal isn't to have students

make an audio tour or even make a documentary film or whatever we're doing, it's to have them intervene in their community's stories or in public consciousness, you might say, through a GIS audio tour or through a documentary or something of the like.

So really one thing that I think my PhD program at Clemson University, the Rhetorics Communication and Information Design or the RCID program, one thing that program really stressed to me throughout and across coursework in the dissertation process is thinking not only in terms of process and product when it comes to multimodal projects, but also thinking in terms of possibility and for me, that's always been civically engaged possibilities for multimodality, like the participatory counter narratives, GIS audio tour that ask students to articulate counter narratives for public consumption through civic rhetorical actions.

So thinking about what multimodality can do and how it can intervene is I think really crucial for multimodal composition and certainly I think gets great responses from students. Some of my best interactions with students have been when we're thinking about how to actually communicate to a public audience, and especially through media, that's probably relatively unfamiliar to them. I have some students who have made YouTube videos in the past, which of course is not entirely the same as making an audio tour episode, but there's lots of cross pollination opportunity that can happen there. But generally speaking, students are brand new. They're learning Audacity for the first time. They're learning perhaps the Adobe Creative Cloud if they're using that technology for the first time.

But really it's an opportunity for experimentation and innovation and then intervention. But yeah, in terms of sound-based media, let's say audio tours or podcasts, I think really the humanity is something that not all media likes say writing oftentimes you might say foregrounds or oftentimes prioritizes. It's helpful to hear a person speak. It's helpful to hear a human speak a lot of the time, but there's always a person behind an idea that an audio tour or a podcast could be articulating. And so anyways, I see that as a real opportunity. Of course, reach is also a major opportunity. Being able to actually reach public audiences is something that I think sound-based media is pretty uniquely equipped to do or has a lot of ability to do, and I find that really exciting as well.

SW: Quick follow up question, Jacob, how has embracing multimodality and digital tools and technologies shifted your pacing in a class like first-year writing? I'm thinking about the time it takes to experiment with and learn new technologies, for example, and how that might change the quantity of larger assignments you give to students learning Audacity or Pro Tools, and understanding how audio recording and editing works is different than opening a Word doc and typing. In what ways has this shaped your curriculum and sequencing of assignments?

JDR: Yeah, yeah, most definitely. It should be scaffolded in very carefully, I would say very slowly. I always like to, generally speaking, I teach multimodal very formal multimodal communication projects as the last project within a given first year composition course. Generally speaking, it's say three out of three projects or I think four projects in one semester is ambitious. I've tried that in the past and everything gets a bit rushed. But yeah, something like, say teaching technology is something that theoretically I would like to avoid, but if you're going to work with multimodality, oftentimes you have to do that. I always try and take a relatively

informal, and you might say experimentation based approach. I haven't done this with podcasts or sound or audio tours yet, but in the past, I've taught students how to make short documentary films, and one of the ways that I like to do that is to take videos of my cat Henry and upload those to our canvas page, and I have students download the short videos, and then I have them go into Premiere Pro or film or whatever technology we're using, whatever software we're using, and I have them create a short video called A Day in the Life of Henry, and they record voiceovers, they arrange the clips in a unique or unconventional way.

They add in credits, they add in subtitles and alt texts and all of that good stuff that basically teaches them how to create a film production in the software while also learning how to tell a story and doing so in a way that's halfway enjoyable. And then you should see the repository of day in the life of Henry videos that I have at this point. I have many of them that students have made over the last couple of years. But yeah, I would say multimodality has to be scaffolded in, and really it has to be a continual conversation that I think instructors revisit with their students over time and thinking about affordances, thinking about constraints, and thinking about how people actually interact with different media.

SW: One of your other pedagogical values is collaborative learning, social learning. Can you talk about how you foster collaboration or the ways in which you curate a classroom committed to collaboration? What does this look like in practice via activities, assignments, assessments, and what tools and technologies help you center collaborative learning?

JDR: Yeah, yeah, of course. I would say I love social and collaborative learning. I like to think really perhaps one of the really important elements of my teaching involves, I suppose what I would call helping students to form horizontal bonds. And when I say horizontal bonds, I just mean student to student relationships that perhaps are nurtured by a course design, but where the instructor isn't necessarily directly present. So supporting and nurturing those horizontal bonds where students are learning from and with one another is I think something that a composition in a writing course could be pretty uniquely equipped to do. I think that's a form of learning that students will potentially take with them throughout their entire writing lives, throughout their entire learning lives. But yeah, I would say social and collaborative learning are also central to what I actually do in my classes, especially in first year writing.

My students collaborate all the time. I have them write and collaborate to write pretend Onion articles, articles for the Onion, the satirical publication to practice diction, to practice writing with a certain tone. I have students collaborate to write mock Kickstarter pages to practice tailoring a message for a particular audience. And then students also collaborate. I have them make a Shark Tank presentations to actually learn about and then enact rhetorical situation in a collaborative social environment where they're actually pitching a product to particular judges and tailoring a message for an audience and that works best collaboratively. And also helps them to think about how collaborative writing actually works in the world, in the workplace, because I think that's collaborative writing is something that perhaps at least I don't dedicate enough time to sometimes, and I've very much made an effort over the past couple of years to incorporate collaborative writing pretty explicitly into my courses.

But anyways, I think my research and especially my dissertation are also about collaborative social learning very explicitly. I use social media tools like Slack and Discord in my classes to support social learning. I primarily use Slack in my dissertation, data in my dissertation research within a course to form a digital learning community. That anyways ends up supporting students in terms of practicing and learning about digital literacy, forming learning ecologies, forming, distributed expertise within the Slack learning community. So anyways, I guess I have students participate on Slack each week on their own terms with a unique participatory contribution that really is meant to leverage basically the practices and logics of social media for learning. So in my dissertation, I conducted a qualitative case study that found social media pedagogies that use technologies like Slack can support learning ecology formation, and distributed expertise, both of which I'm writing about in future projects and showcase, I think, some of what collaborative social learning initiatives, especially using social media can actually do.

So, yeah, I think that digital technologies and participatory media can help to support social relationships between students that can be leveraged for learning, and I find that a really exciting and a really fun possibility for composition studies.

SW: Jacob, you are a visiting assistant professor at Georgia Tech. I was hoping to give you some space to talk more about your move from grad school to being a visiting assistant professor. Maybe you could help demystify that shift and position for us and share what your experiences have been like.

JDR: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I would say I obviously can't speak for every visiting assistant professor out there, and my experience as a white guy will be very different, I think, from other people's experience sometimes, and obviously even the term visiting assistant professor can be pretty broad, and your job conditions can vary widely. But I guess at Georgia Tech, I'm a visiting assistant professor. I've enjoyed my time tremendously. We obviously have great students here at Tech, so that's really helpful. And it was really the foundation of what I've enjoyed as a visiting assistant professor. But really being a VAP, I think for people in composition and even say postdoc positions, which are similar to being a VAP in some ways, I think. I think it can be a really good opportunity for some people to consider if they don't immediately land really the perfect long-term job that they want.

For instance, I'm on a one or two-year contract, but lots of VAP positions I think are pretty temporary. Really the main advantage for me, and I'm imagining this is helpful for a lot of others, is that visiting roles give you more time to be on the job market so you can perhaps find the right job, not just the available job. And that's easier to believe in when you're like me and you end up loving your position. But I think that having a little bit more time to find the right fit, to find the right geographical location, to find the right teaching load or research expectation, that sort of fit can be really important in having some extra time to be on the job market to really hone your job talk, hone your campus visit skills, hone your Zoom interview skills can be really helpful, and a visiting role can enable that.

So something that I like about being a visiting assistant professor is having the opportunity to teach courses that are new to me at a new institution, and I have a chance at Georgia Tech to teach upper division technical writing courses, which are relatively new to me. So I'm teaching

right now courses on social media on a course called the Rhetoric of Technical Narratives. I'm teaching a course called Communication and Culture over the summer, which I'm really excited about. And these are courses that are upper division courses that allow me to experiment with new course designs, brand new projects.

I think lots of VAP positions give you that advantage or that affordance. But really I think they're all about testing the waters of being a faculty member. A major advantage maybe perhaps for many, could be time to focus on research. I don't know what a standard teaching load really is for every VAP out there, but right now I teach at 2-2, and it gives me a ton of time to focus on research and also on the job market to find a more permanent job, which of course, being on the job market's a major draw on your time.

I would say one other advantage is mentorship and professional assistance. Very much something that happens at Georgia Tech, lots of great scholars here, tenure track people who are helping me, even though they don't have to necessarily. So the mentorship and professional development opportunities are crucial, and really I think that really like VAP positions give you a chance to grow and perhaps expand as a scholar. So I've enjoyed my time and I would recommend it to many.

SW: This is my last question and it's a follow-up. What have been some challenges in being a visiting assistant professor? I'm curious about the transient nature of this position being somewhere for one or two years, moving there, being on the market again, the uncertainty and possible implications, like how this might impact interactions with colleagues and even investment in the program and so on.

JDR: Yeah, I guess a short answer is that it's not great. Things can get a bit murky, especially if you have a family, if you're moving a family for a one or two year role. In some cases, I think people will have sign a contract for one year with an option for a second year, but that's not guaranteed. That's something that I think many visiting professors, visiting faculty, have to navigate and have to, frankly, you have to make your life conform to institutional needs and budgets and policies that are almost entirely out of your control. I'd imagine that many people are renewed or not renewed, alternatively through no fault of their own, through no cause of their own. And that can be obviously a situation that is not ideal for many people.

I think so long as you go into a contract for a visiting role with clear expectations and frankly, get a lot of things in writing in your contract, that could be pretty crucial, because I've heard horror stories of people being promised a certain course load and then teaching stuff they didn't necessarily want to teach, and also having differences in expectations versus reality from what they expected. But it can be really tough. Luckily for me, I only moved about two hours west from Clemson, South Carolina to Atlanta, Georgia. But it can be a real strain on your family. You can be a real strain on your, if you have a partner, if you have a family, that sort of thing.

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