Background and Commitment for Practice

Sheppard explains how the authors developed the idea for the textbook and outlines the book's three pedagogical commitments: 1) Look at and analyze many examples, 2) Provide hands-on learning, and 3) Use flexible assessment strategies. (*length 4:04*)

Sheppard: Alright, well I'm gonna go ahead and get started. My name is Jenny Sheppard, I'm going to be presenting with Kristen and Cheryl today and we're going to talk just a little bit about the book that we just finished writing: Writer/Designer: A guide to making multimodal projects. I'm going to give you a little bit of background on why we wrote this book and kind of our approach to it. We were all grad students together at Michigan Tech when the faculty there got rid of first year writing and turned it into a second year course called Revisions on Written, Oral, and Visual Communication. And it was really a challenging course for us to teach as grad students and to move from being compositionists to people who were really focused on integrating all these different modes. And the idea behind the course was really to make sure students could think about the rhetorical situation, using all available means of persuasion. So one of the arguments that those faculty made was that the underlying strategy of the class was not to separate the oral and the written and the visual communication but rather to help students come to an understanding that purposeful selection of mode and medium always involves making rhetorical decisions and requires thoughtful and aware modification for particular audiences and circumstances. So in other words our job was not to teach discrete conventions of each mode but really to help students consider which modes were most appropriate in a given circumstance.

And so in the about decade or so since we've graduated we've all gone on to work in kind of different areas of writing studies. I've focused a little bit more on professional communication, Cheryl's looked at digital publishing, and Kristen has worked in indigenous rhetorics that gives you the simplification. In that time though, we've continued to modify what we've done in our teaching. We constantly are sharing syllabi, back and forth, taking each other's work and kind of modifying it, making it into new courses. But what we found along the way is that we didn't, we couldn't find a book that really captured the way that we wanted to think about moving from theory into practice. So there's a lot of multimodal theory out there, we've really followed kind of The New London Group's work on multiliteracies and a belief that students need an experience with all of those things. So we decided to write a book that would help us translate that. I'm just going to tell you how we shaped this book and what we believe in.

First, we really believe in having students look at lots and lots of examples and analyzing them, from all different kinds of modes so that they can see how other people are approaching this. We want students to have a common language, so common terms that we can talk about in class. Things about design, things about – if we are talking about audio, how different sound effects or volume levels or transitions, all of those things really affect the audience. So the ability of students to identify particular affordances and rhetorical choices within various media is really important for them in being able to choose what's appropriate for a given situation.

Secondly we believe in the power of hands-on learning. That it's really important to actually get in there and try creating these kinds of texts. It's a huge difference between

reading and analyzing a text and actually putting one together yourself. And so a lot of the work in the book is really about getting students to actually construct their own texts through whatever medium they are choosing.

Lastly we believe in a flexible assessment strategy. So our strategy for looking at the work of students and providing feedback really has to be dependent upon where they're starting from, the kinds of media that they are using, the kind of audience that they are creating it for, all of those things. So we don't really have on set strategy for how we assess things.

So that gives you a little bit of sense of why we approached this book the way we did and what we hoped students will get from it. For 176 page book it took us a remarkably long time, but we hope that if you check it out and use it in your class it will be something that you'll see can be used as a linear text or something very modular. So if you want to look at just how to do storyboarding or you want to look at genre analysis, each of the chapters will give you a way of being able to do that.