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ENGL 3860: Public Rhetoric
Fall 2014

Mini-Grant Results Report

Goals and Expectations

English 3860 was designed to explore how rhetoric (collective action, urban design, public policy) shapes publics and how public places themselves (civic spaces, parks, and mundane features such as traffic lights and trashcans) work to shape rhetorical activity. Individually, students in the course produced a series of texts (loosely defined) devoted to a topic or object of concern (local food, music, policy issues, scientific and/or technological developments). The texts were composed for a particular public and were released on a regular basis (think in terms of a podcast episodes, magazine issues, or a television series). Students had complete creative control over their productions in terms of medium, style, and content. The only requirement was that these texts be public and for an audience that needs to be persuaded.

This is the individual work students did throughout the semester. However, I was eager to have the *students work together on a larger project exploring public rhetoric*. In addition to the desire to make such a project collaborative, I wanted the project to move students outside of the classroom and into the public places around them: to explore those places as both a function of rhetorical activity and to see how those places generate rhetorical activity. How do public places afford, constrain or otherwise shape the ways in which people relate to and communicate with one another?

I found such project in the activity known as Geocaching (the official website is located here: <http://www.geocaching.com/>). Brian McNely, at the University of Kentucky, describes geocaching this way:

Geocaching is a recreational activity similar to treasure hunting. Geocachers create and cleverly hide containers in both urban and rural environments, all around the world. After doing so, they create cache names and descriptions and upload this information, along with coordinates in latitude and longitude, to a public website accessed by other geocachers. Geocaching uses the tools of contemporary knowledge work for a kind of knowledge play, weaving together practice with sophisticated computing devices and applications, rich and varied forms of visual and written documentation, community-generated advice, hints, and grievances, and social media in several forms.

One of chief virtues of geocaching is the way it reimagines, in this case, urban space. Most days we travel through the city without giving its mundane features a second thought. However, it is these mundane features that give shape to city life: road medians, intersections, small parks and other green spaces, barriers such as fences and walls, bus shelters, and even trashcans. Geocachers must navigate everyday locations that become extraordinary by virtue of the hidden cache. Geocaching connects individuals with these mundane yet meaningful places.

Students in the class practiced geocaching two ways. Early in the semester, we searched for caches in the areas around SLU. We logged these finds and document them using still photography and written text. The class maintained a blog to both track our geocaching work and reflect on how that activity reorients us to the city (slupublicrhetoric.tumblr.com). Later in the semester, we created

and hid caches of our own based on our experiences earlier in the semester. In short, we explored how we can distribute caches to shape how other geocachers move through and experience the city. How can we see geocaching as a form of public rhetoric that persuades people to see the city of St Louis in new way?

In order to for my class to engage in geocaching we needed handheld GPS devices (paid for with the mini-grant). While many smartphones are GPS enabled, such devices are generally less accurate.

Course Outcomes

Since the completion of the course, I have named the work described above *geocomposition* (see attached manuscript currently under review at *College Composition and Communication*). The goal of geocomposition is to have students engage the oft-overlooked yet nevertheless vital features of place and the ways in which such features shape their own experiences. Geocomp relies on locative media like handheld GPS units: portable media designed both to function while moving and to work within the confines of physical locations. As media scholars Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva write, locative media “are connecting us to the physical world and providing a framework for geographically located social interactions” (61). Their articulation of locative media induces geocaching to resonate with the goals of public rhetoric and writing pedagogy. Writing is itself a locative medium that moves through and works within places. As Bradley Smith has recently written, “Writing in transit speaks to a kind of layered journey of fits and starts, where texts are composed in many places with artifacts from the past carrying through to future drafts or moldering into dust (223-224). Writing always moves. Making the connection between writing and locative media even stronger, they write, “Mobile phones have become writing utensils for net localities” (Gordan & de Souza e Silva 53).

Before the students placed geocaches themselves, they searched for geocaches around campus. I wanted students both to understand the logistics and techniques of searching (using handheld GPS devices) as well as how participants interact with caches: documenting, photographing, describing, and evaluating. The first time out, I only had my students find the caches and document that work. Later, I had them return to see what else a geocache might do beyond being an item to locate and/or a puzzle to solve. In a separate exercise, then, I asked the students to revisit the spot of the geocache:

Return to the site of your find. As a team, take five photographs (or five 10-second videos) from that site. Return to the classroom. As a group, select one of those images or videos and collaboratively compose an exactly 200-word narrative about it.

Geocaches reorient participants to place. One group of students was particularly eloquent in making the geocache say something compelling about the place it inhabited. The narrative they collaboratively composed reflects their awareness of themselves as bodies out of place as well as the rhetorical significance generated by the geocache and their interaction with it. As media scholar Jason Farman writes, “By utilizing technologies that draw on a person’s location through GPS, a user is understood as being situated in relationship to technology and thus experiences the world as collaboration between digital and material interfaces” (44). The students wrote:

Medians were installed as safety measures—mainly as a measure to prevent head-on collisions between opposing lanes of traffic—attempting to maintain established channels of road traffic. Medians create and are spaces in the middle of the road. These spaces, however, are not themselves designed to be accessible (or particularly desirable) by any notion of

traffic—pedestrian, automobile, or otherwise. Here, a group of young scholar-warriors intervene and recreate the space, charting a new understanding of the landscape within an already charted (and often neglected) space. Whereas the original recipe of the median called for safety via exclusion, these whipper-snappers whipped up danger via inclusion. To access the median, these potential martyrs of rhetoric were forced to interact with—and as a result become part of—traffic in ways discouraged by the design. In realizing what the lay of the land harbors beneath the surface, they are reminded of an excerpt of Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* as they experience life on Forest Park:

No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat...and doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?

After familiarizing themselves with geocaching, students selected, pitched, and voted on themes around which to create a series of geocaches. While I originally planned on the entire class working on one project, there were two equally popular projects: weird, inexplicable statues and murals/graffiti, both of which the class saw as fitting together under the larger umbrella of public art. With themes in hands, students went scouting, using class meetings, emails, and text messaging to coordinate their efforts. Once the locations were selected, students researched the murals or statues and determined the best places to hide caches within the rules and guidelines: for instance, no caches can be placed on private property without permission nor can they promote a business. Attention to rhetoric thus began early, being built into the game procedurally.

Students next composed descriptions for each the geocaches they placed. Here are the instructions I developed for this task:

Here are a few things I expect your descriptions to do. Remember, you aren’t simply raising awareness; you want this geocache to move an audience, and a description is part of how you do this.

- Give participants a sense of what they will need in order to locate and interact with the geocache. Also, provide a sense of the location. I.e., “Cache located in secluded park. Bring a pen and flashlight,” or “Cache located at a busy intersection: approach with caution and stealth.”
- Instruct the geocachers on how to engage the art/mural/sculpture in front of them. What are its unique features? Does it have a history? Does it have a stated purpose? In short, help them to make sense of what they are looking at.
- What else should a participant attend to? What is the environmental context of the art/mural/sculpture? You want them to take a moment and experience the city around them.

Use the description to create a portal through which fellow geocachers can reorient to the places around them.

My instructions for composing geocache descriptions reflect several elements of the course. First, they were a function of student experiences at that point in the semester. Having been impressed with their geocaching narratives, my instructions build from their responses to the geocaches they found. Second, the advice resonates with the themes they chose for their geocaches and what their caches are attending to. Third, the guidelines reflect common geocaching practices. Finally, my

instructions encourage students to compose descriptions that expressed their goals for the project: tell participants what to attend to, what to value, and why.

After the descriptions are composed, or more commonly, as the descriptions were being composed, students began to construct the containers they would hide. This work included scouting places to hide them, which in turn suggested what kind of cache to construct: there is wide variety of geocache container types. Here, my multimodal approach to writing is indebted to the work of composition scholar Jody Shipka. Worrying that multimedia writing, and composition more, generally has become unquestionably linked to “computer-based, digitized, screen-mediated texts” (7-8), Shipka argues that teachers must “create instead opportunities for students to examine the highly distributed and fundamentally multimodal aspects of all communicative practice” (84). In this vein, Shipka describes students working with found materials such as wood or evocative, personal objects such as ballet slippers. Working across these as media, along with other screen-based compositions, increases the inventive potential we wish to cultivate in writing classrooms.

Read in the context of Shipka, the construction of geocache containers entails compositional considerations. For instance, the selection of materials (container sizes, electrical tape, and zip ties) to camouflage or otherwise conceal the cache and to fasten or secure the cache in place, reflects a situational awareness of geocaching conventions (standard container sizes), audience expectations (typical geocache types), physical context (urban or rural, heavily trafficked or sparsely populated), and the goals of the series the cache is a component of (renewed attention to unique urban features). The value of geocomp in the writing classroom, then, is the range of compositions it generates.

Another valuable feature of geocaching is that feedback and evaluation happen in concrete places and at specific times; they are never general. All logs are timed-stamped and tied to the GPS coordinates of the geocache. We know when and where the feedback was composed: what the weather was like and what time of day it was. All of these things bear on the quality of the participant’s experience. Should we include in the description that geocachers will need to bring a flashlight if they go looking for the cache in the late afternoon or early morning? Do we need to move a container to a more accessible location? Issues of accessibility, terrain, and difficulty of the location of the container are tagged and so considered by students as they composed and revised their geocaches. In geocomp, the embodied experiences of an audience becomes important. The final stage, which can last indefinitely once the caches are placed and geocachers begin finding them, is the posting of logs. Geocaches, for all intents and purposes, become relatively permanent, though hidden public features. Maintenance now and then—requested by other community members—is also involved. Revising geocaches is part of the game.

At each stage of composing geocaches, students were confronted by an audience with definable and imposable expectations as well as the means to respond to and evaluate caches at several points in the process. Furthermore, the enthusiasm geocachers bring to the game results in nearly instantaneous responses such as the ones reproduced here.

Conclusion

As of the final writing of this report, 10 geocaches have been placed and published. A total of 141 logs were posted. The goal of the geocaches was to move people to known locations in order to see new things and experience the city differently. While far from systematic, students reported being especially pleased with the number of logs explicitly mentioning these types of experiences. Logs like, “never knew this was here,” “thanks for bringing me here,” “Really weird,” and “sat and contemplated.” The intensity of the geocaching community and resonance of the goals of our project with the practices and values of geocaching insured that we received plenty of feedback, which helped us reflect on public rhetoric generally. Throughout this geocomp project, I was

consistently impressed by the level of engagement I witnessed on the part of both my students and the community they became a part of. Indeed, the biggest takeaway of the project, to my mind, was the intensity and immediacy of community responsiveness. Apart from working directly with clients in community or service-based projects, never have I had this amount of interaction with individuals outside of the classroom—all the better that it took place across writing and digital technologies. Locative media provided the channel through which this social interaction took place.

These results are encouraging. As with many class projects, particularly supplemental ones like this, I felt that more could have been done with and around it. For instance, placing the geocaches earlier in the semester to increase the amount of time spent interacting and responding to fellow geocachers. I would have liked to spend more time composing and revising descriptions, some of which were less well composed than others. That said, given the procedures of the community, the pre-existing infrastructure, and the, generally speaking, low-cost entry, geocaching works well as a large collaborative project.⁹ I am thus comfortable arguing that geocaching in a rhetoric and writing course—committed to public engagement—places students within a specific and responsive community using rhetoric, writing, and technology. As Michael Faris reminds us, “Rhetoric and writing studies asks us to attend to the particularities of writing: the moments and movements, the locations, the material objects, the networks” (23).

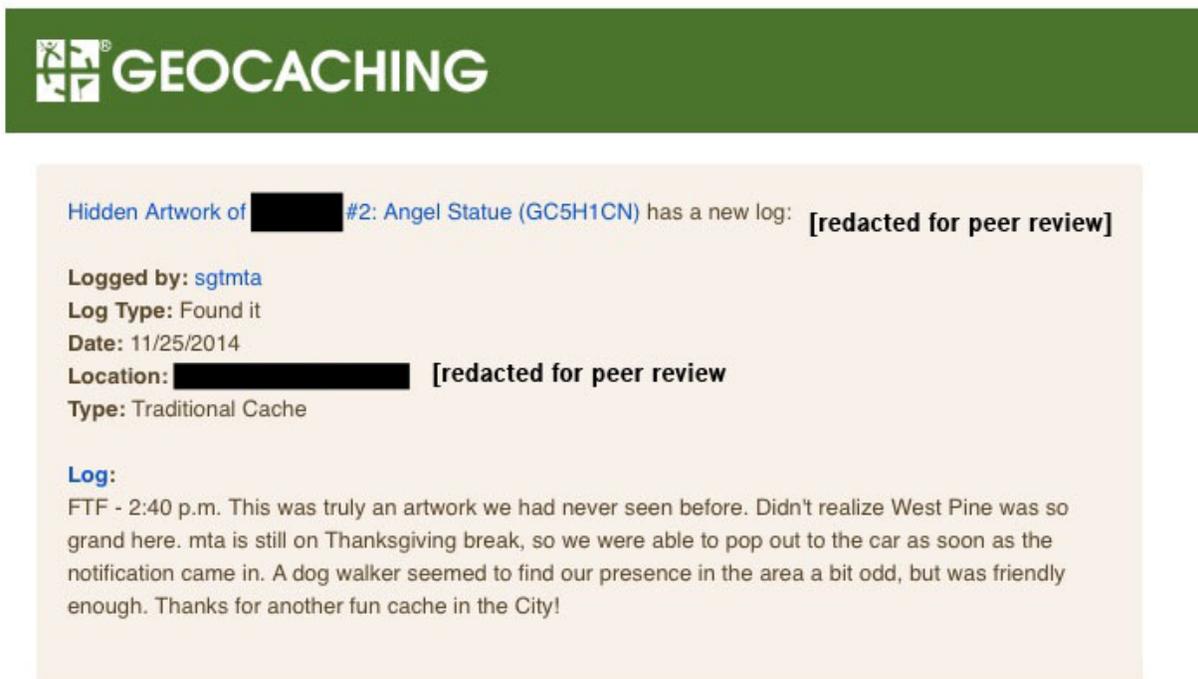


Image 1. Log for a geocache articulating the success of the cache in terms of the series' and the course's goals.

A telling moment, and one I conclude with, is a log posted at 2:40 p.m. on November 25, 2014 (Image 1). The log was composed in the explicit terms of the students' project goals. I immediately shared this image to the course Tumblr with the caption “Rhetoric is moving people to new places.” Students had moved someone through space in such a way as to show them something new and to reappraise and better appreciate a seemingly familiar part of the city. Such movement was achieved in part by rhetorically sensitive texts composed with and across digital and analog media. Rhetoric and composition tied to place through locative media—in short, *geocomposition*—can make writing classrooms particularly transformative.