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The Physical Mundane as Topos: Walking/ Dwelling/Using as Rhetorical Invention

Borrowing from rhetorically based theories of usability, this article offers an invention tactic designed to help students understand how mundane features of everyday dwelling places have significant impacts on their educational experiences. Additionally, the offered tactic helps students understand how to craft rhetorical critiques in contexts inside and outside academia.

In an effort to increase its undergraduate population by five thousand students, the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), like many universities attempting to grow, has restructured its recruitment strategies and started reconstructing its physical campus. Both changes have had positive outcomes. UAB's student population is more diverse, and the students have access to more up-to-date instructional spaces. However, those positive outcomes have also produced unexpected and complicated challenges. Although many narratives uncritically assert the positives associated with growth, this article addresses the fact that an expanding university will almost always face its share of unforeseen complications. A growing university will, for example, usually need to determine what features of the

CCC 68:2 / DECEMBER 2016

original campus will remain and what features will be removed, remodeled, or added to the physical structures it supports. Even though the decision makers may claim the changes are in the best interests of the students, students themselves are sometimes left out of the planning process—especially students not affiliated with the university when it developed its growth plan. Borrowing from humanistic and rhetorically based theories of usability studies, this article offers an invention tactic students can use to become critically aware users of what is and is not included in a university's attempts to restructure its college campus. Ultimately, this article offers a usability and rhetorically based pedagogy I have used for the past four and a half years in a number of different writing courses designed to help students generate institutional critiques they can deploy within academic and public rhetorical situations.

Exploring physical spaces from a usability perspective may seem too technical or out of place for the composition classroom. However, Donald Norman's extensive discussion of doors and door knobs in *The Design of Everyday Things* demonstrates that most people habitually interact with a number of seemingly mundane technologies almost daily. And, in their 2005 CCC article, Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey T. Grabill, by using Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder's definition of infrastructures to examine the support systems for multimodal text production, also demonstrate the wealth of rhetorical opportunities that examining the physical in localized contexts can produce. Additionally, over the last two decades many professional and technical communication scholars, such as Heather McGovern in her 2007 *JTWC* article and J. Blake Scott in his 2008 *TCQ* article, have attempted to expand the reach of usability studies outside typical technical communication contexts.¹ In this article I expand on their work by illustrating how humanistic/rhetorically based theories of usability—those that are heavily dependent on issues of audience awareness and context analysis, and that place the needs of the users above the technology being studied—can help students in a composition course view the physical structures included in a college campus as a university-sponsored product. I

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also demonstrate how getting students to analyze those structures through the lens of “use” helps them understand the impact those structures can have on their overall education experiences.

As I later explain, encouraging students to analyze a college campus as a university-sponsored product offers opportunities for becoming situated within rhetorical discourse. Analyzing their encounters with a college campus affords students the opportunity to explore a very familiar (and “real,” to use the words of my students) rhetorical situation. When included in

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classroom discussions, the shared physical features of the college campus become, from an Aristotelian point of view, types of argumentative *topos* similar to how Kathleen Ethel Welch has previously used the term. According to Welch, “*Topos*, the concept, is used here as a physical location with implications for the other kinds of *topoi* as well as other issues that enable us to construct the physical spaces of [computer classrooms]” (336). As in Welch’s discussion of computer classrooms, sharing their experiences of successfully and unsuccessfully dwelling within a restructured college campus becomes an argumentative commonplace for the students and a source of argumentative inspiration. “Using” the physical features of a college campus becomes a common foundation for discussion, and each problem the students identify becomes a new topic of argumentation.

In addition, because of the embedded focus on analyzing and preparing arguments regarding the usefulness of public structures, the discourse the students produce can move beyond the walls of the classroom and connect to broader audiences. As in other contexts more commonly associated with usability studies, students analyzing the usefulness of public spaces can address a shared public made up of what usability specialists describe as stakeholders (i.e., other students, professors, university officials, and anyone with a stake in the university’s success). Learning how to successfully address those stakeholders is a rhetorical activity and, as I later explain, requires more than just an analysis of the physical. As Michael Warner argues in *Public and Counterpublics*, “Publics are essentially intertextual frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts” (16). When highlighted as part of classroom activities, having students share their experiences openly with

other stakeholders reminds them that their own on-campus experiences are shared experience. Plus, as I demonstrate in more detail later, during those moments of sharing students understand that to produce an effective rhetorical response to their engagement with the physical often requires an examination of the public, sometimes mundane, rhetoric surrounding the physical structures under study. By analyzing the rhetoric surrounding the physical structures they study, students see how the discourses they produce often need to be tailored in order to engage the various stakeholders who have a vested interest in the university's attempts to restructure its college campus.

Exploring physical spaces, often through the process of conducting a site analysis, is not a new addition to composition pedagogy. As John Ackerman claims, "sites are contexts, occasions, and ingredients for discourse" (96). In other words, physical spaces are places and part of the contexts where rhetorical activity happens. What I offer in this article is a different type of analysis that students can use to critique the effectiveness of those physical spaces and that promotes additional rhetorical activity crafted for public audiences. Because the physical structures students analyze are shared spaces and the arguments they craft from their findings are shared publicly, the next section contains a brief overview of how rhetorical agency has shifted in theories of usability. As Marilyn Cooper claims: "Agency is inescapable: rhetors are agents by virtue of their addressing an audience. They become responsible rhetors by recognizing the audience not only as agents, but as concrete others who have opinions and beliefs grounded in experiences and perceptions and meanings constructed in their brains" (442). As I explain in more detail in the following section, rhetorically based and humanistic approaches to usability focus on the in-context experiences, and sometimes beliefs, of other stakeholders. Humanistic approaches to usability also often place the researcher in the role of user advocate, which does highlight Cooper's claim above. To illustrate my last point, the next section of this article is dedicated to narrowing down the type of usability practices around which I am basing my model of analysis in order to frame how those practices can function as part of a rhetorically based approach to composition pedagogy.

Throughout the rest of this article, I use the situation at UAB as an extended example of theory in practice to discuss how I have developed and deployed the offered tactic in first-year writing courses. Through

these examples, I demonstrate how rhetorically based theories of usability, specifically user-centered design and participatory design, can make mundane, yet problematic, features of a physical environment a rich source of rhetorical argumentation. More specifically, I discuss how user-centered design theories and participatory design philosophies can work collectively with Michel de Certeau's attempts to establish a theory of the mundane in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. As de Certeau argues, "the task consists not in substituting a representation for the ordinary or covering it up with mere words, but in showing how it introduces itself into our techniques [...] and how it can reorganize the place from which discourse is produced" (5). By focusing on his theory of walking/dwelling, I argue de Certeau's work provides a model of discovery that students can use to gain a better understanding of how the changes included in a university's growth plan impact their learning experiences before those changes become mundane features of the college campus. This article follows in the footsteps of Robert J. Topinka, who uses de Certeau's work to demonstrate how walkers can transform suburban spaces specifically designed to accommodate the act of driving. Ultimately, this article illustrates how de Certeau's theory of walking/dwelling helps students discover how often overlooked, already mundane features of their college campus not included in a university's growth plan impact how they interact with the physical structures that help support their academic endeavors.

User-Centered Technologies, Participatory Design, and the Mundane

Located in downtown Birmingham, UAB has historically tried to attract commuter students as a major component of its undergraduate recruitment efforts. Like other urban campuses, however, the number of new commuter students the university can attract will always be limited and is largely responsible for the university's restructured growth plan.² In its attempt to expand and reach its target growth of five thousand new undergraduate students, the university has restructured its recruitment strategies to include an aggressive campaign to target more out-of-area, out-of-state, and international students. Like the nonlocal students heavily targeted in the university's restructured growth plan, I am a transplant when it comes to the "Magic City." My initial unfamiliarity with Birmingham did create its share of classroom challenges when I arrived, but once I became familiar

with UAB and Birmingham those same challenges led to a positive discovery. As I quickly discovered, one of the few things the students who lived in Birmingham, commuter students, students new to the area, and myself had in common was the city and the constantly expanding college campus we shared. In finding something familiar to discuss with my students, like the joys and pains associated with getting to know a new city, I unknowingly tapped into something very powerful. What I found is that the seemingly insignificant, generally overlooked, or mundane features of shared physical spaces can become a rich source of rhetorical argumentation.

To clarify, most of my students have viewed increasing the number and diversity of the undergraduate population at UAB as a positive outcome of the university's restructured growth plan. But what really got students engaged in conversation was acknowledging, discovering, and venting about the problems they encountered interacting with the campus. Many—if not most—of those problems are directly associated with the university's attempts to accommodate a growing student population. Once I realized just how invested most of the students were in their on-campus experiences, I started searching for a way to convert our casual conversations into a productive form of rhetorical inquiry. I wanted to provide students with a way of looking/discovering, a way of analyzing how the mundane and the rhetoric-surrounding it contributes to something larger, and a way for the students to test their interpretations to ensure the problems they had identified were not just isolated to their own experiences. During my attempts to formalize what was happening in my classroom discussions, the techno-rhetorician in me took over. I started thinking about my own experiences as a student, teacher, and practitioner of usability studies and my own theoretical explorations into user-centered design and participatory design philosophies.³

Including usability studies in a composition course may, at first, not seem appropriate given the historical attachments the term *usability* has with the computer sciences and the rhetorical product development practices Robert R. Johnson describes as “System-Centered” approaches. According to Johnson, system-centered approaches have historically valued, above all else, “technology that is most efficient, in terms of quality, cost management, and time” and were “driven by the concerns of the technology first” (“Unfortunate” 196). Under the system-centered approach, the term *usability* was often only used as a way for product developers to claim

they had allowed users to help them “bug test” or “debug” a product before releasing it to the general public—meaning, the concerns of the product’s audience, or users, never really influenced how the product was developed.

If the system-centered model were the theoretical foundation of the tactic being developed in this article, it would, in essence, be an argument to return to a period of time before theories associated with the “social turn” became a fixture of rhetorical criticism. Instead, what I am presenting stems from a very social, rhetorically based form of usability studies informed by developments attributed to the social turn in professional and technical communication theory. As many theorists have pointed out, the term *usability* has undergone a number of metamorphoses designed to increase the role of users in product development.⁴ Although each metamorphosis is important, listed below is a condensed list of highlights demonstrating how professional and technical communicators have attempted to shift the term away from system-centered models toward a more broadly defined, rhetorical, and human-focused form of research.

To combat the lack of audience awareness associated with the system-centered approach to usability, professional and technical communication specialists such as Patricia Sullivan started advocating for a new approach to usability studies that included user involvement at each stage of a product’s development (263). A number of theorists shared Sullivan’s critique of what was considered common practice at the time and her call for new approaches to usability studies. Included in those newer approaches to usability were ways to reposition the users’ role in product development. In *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and Other Mundane Artifacts*, Robert R. Johnson argues for a more user-centered perspective for product development as “a collaborative, negotiated affair” (135). The users, under Johnson’s “User-Centered” model, are viewed as active participants of a product’s design cycle, rather than rhetorically unaware testers. Similarly, in “Rhetorical Research: Toward a User-Centered Approach,” Ann Brady argues, “Participatory design thus aims to dismantle barriers between working people and technical specialists in order to build better communication between those using computer products and those developing and maintaining them” (68). Under the usability models offered by theorists such as Sullivan, Johnson, and Brady, users became more than just participants of a study designed to help “fix” a product; instead, their involvement was viewed as one of the most important components of an

effective product development scheme. By advocating for increased user involvement in every stage of the product development process, user-centered and participatory design theories included, sometimes indirectly, attempts to shift the users' rhetorical positioning toward active, rather than passive or responsive, engagement.

As the term *usability* shifted, how usability researchers viewed “use” and issues associated with context also shifted. In “Design versus Design—From the Shaping of Products to the Creation of User Experiences,” Jan Gulliksen and Ann Lantz help rearticulate how professional and technical communication specialists regarded use by claiming a product's design is rhetorical and reframed “use” as “a communication problem” (10). Embedded in Gulliksen and Lantz's argument is a dialogical approach to usability studies that focuses on establishing a balance between the needs of the developer, the functionality and design of the product, and the users' needs to accomplish nonpredefined communication acts with the technology in question. Additionally, more contemporary usability theorists consistently argue for the inclusion of context analysis when developing a usability study. As Stephanie Rosenbaum argues, “usability doesn't take place in a vacuum; rather, it happens in context” (210). Also, as Alonso-Ríos et al. contend, “Knowledge of the context of use for a product or system is essential to ensuring that a product is adapted to real conditions of use” (968). To many usability specialists, including Rosenbaum and Alonso-Ríos et al., the only way to truly judge a product's level of usability is to include context, or where the product will be used, in the process of testing. Testing where use happens, to many usability specialists, has become an essential testing condition.⁵ The context surrounding a product's placement, like any other rhetorical activity, not only impacts how users interact with the product but also influences the success of the communication problem users attempt to solve with the eventual product.

In arguing for a more rhetorically based form of usability research, the theorists highlighted above, and many more, have demonstrated how

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shifting the rhetorical positioning of users toward active engagement could prolong a product's usefulness because actual users, and their in-context needs, helped design the product. In the next section, I describe in more detail how user-centered and participatory models of usability provide the foundation necessary to help students view themselves as users of a university-sponsored product they need to "use" in order to complete their college educations. To harness the power of a rhetorically informed usability studies perspective in my composition courses, I started looking through the projects I had previously assigned my professional and technical communication students. Although I have continuously changed parts of the assignment and the requirements over the last four and a half years, what I have developed as a final course project for my first-year composition students always starts with a similar version of the following prompt:

During this project you will be using what you have learned so far about rhetorical situations and composing texts for specific audiences to introduce and document a specific problem facing UAB students. To get started, think about the situation at UAB and what forces outside of your control impact your daily activities. If you were in control, what aspects of the physical structures you share with other students would you change? When considering topics to explore, think about use. Is there something in particular on UAB's campus that you simply find unusable, something that could be improved as a way to make it more usable, or something that would be used more often by other UAB students if it were changed?

My goal in offering the above prompt, as I explain in more detail in the next section, was to have students uncover problematic features of their

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shared university-sponsored product and start questioning features of the university's growth plan.

Additionally, encouraging students to view themselves as active users of their college campus, specifically the mundane physical features of the campus, has become a rhetorically based entry point my students use to engage in their own brand of institutional critique. By including themselves as participants in the process used to

restructure their college campus, students discover they need to craft their

arguments and share their findings in ways that appeal to diverse stakeholders who have different needs and are persuaded by different forms of evidence. As I explain, use, the inability to use some of the physical features of their campus, or ideas about how to make a common physical feature more user-centered, help local and nonlocal students connect in a common discourse. The campus that students and I share becomes something we can all relate to and experience. We all walk on the same sidewalks and drive down the same streets, and the same construction zones impact all of our travels. Getting students to formally consider use as a source of inspiration was the first step. But to get the students fully engaged in the activity also required the development of a “tactic,” to use de Certeau’s term, capable of allowing them to start recognizing the subtleties of the ordinary and how those subtleties impact their daily interactions with a college campus.

Walking/Dwelling as Rhetorical Invention Tactic

In an effort to attract more out-of-area, out-of-state, and international students, UAB has made reconstructing its physical campus a priority. School administrators have argued that cutting-edge classrooms, state-of-the-art research facilities, and a robust infrastructure to support on-campus living will help bolster UAB’s restructured global recruitment efforts. Making those changes, however, has produced a situation where UAB’s campus is under constant construction. As I explained earlier, examining issues associated with using the campus during the reconstruction process is the focal point of the course project I developed for my first-year composition students. Getting the students engaged in the process required augmenting my classroom practices to include activities designed to help them transition from passive to active users of their shared university-sponsored product. I developed a series of in-class and out-of-class activities intended to help the students start viewing their on-campus experiences as a form of research to uncover overlooked problems with the physical features of their shared dwelling places. Those activities, as I explain in this section, are based on merging the approaches to usability I highlighted in the previous section with de Certeau’s attempts to theorize tactics and develop a rhetoric of the ordinary.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau quickly and carefully distinguishes between what he calls “strategies” and “tactics.” According to de Certeau, strategies are “the calculation (or manipulation) of power

relationships” used by those in power to “manage” the “*places*” they have the power to control, and tactics are the “calculated,” yet opportunistic, “actions” used inside those places by the managed (35–37). Under de Certeau’s theory, everyday activities like walking are tactical activities. Walkers, for example, can make the calculated decision to jaywalk at any time during their travels and circumvent the strategic placement of sidewalks to define proper walking pathways. Thus, walkers can creatively determine their own path of exploration. Additionally, what I developed draws heavily on de Certeau’s theory of “Spatial Storytelling.” As de Certeau argues: “In short, *space* is a *practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (117). De Certeau’s theories are important to the usability-based assignment I have developed because they help to clarify and set up a contrast between how administrators and students view a college campus. Under this framework, UAB’s campus can be viewed as a “*practiced place*” managed by the university and “transformed into space” by the everyday tactical actions of students. Accordingly, walking is a tactical activity my students use while working on the usability-based assignment.

It is important to point out, however, that my students do not walk into the usability-based assignment completely unprepared. This assignment actually builds upon a previous assignment. Prior to engaging with the usability-based assignment, my students work their way through a comparative analysis of two physical locations on campus. To help frame what happens next, I ask the students during the comparative assignment to hunt for the most frustrating location attached to their typical day on campus and then compare it to a similar, yet less frustrating, location. My goal in the comparative analysis is to have the students gain a critical eye for observation by first finding a troublesome aspect of their everyday encounters with the campus and then finding its less frustrating equivalent. Textually and visually documenting problems with physical spaces on campus and comparing their findings to alternative structures helps the students become active and knowledgeable users of their adventures and prepares them for a usability-based assignment.

When I present the usability-based assignment, the first preparatory activity students complete is walking around the building where our class is held. Before the students leave, I ask them to find two possible use-based problems associated with the building. When the students return, I then

have them present what they found to their peers, who represent a real audience made up of actual stakeholders, and explain why the problems they found should be a concern for the other members of the class. In a recent example, one student described the building's only elevator violently shaking and almost getting stuck between floors. A different student showed a picture of a building placard containing an upside-down rendition of the building with a "You are here" label positioned on the wrong side of the building.

At the end of the introductory class period, I ask the students to start documenting everything they do leading up to the next time we see each other. During the next class the students share what they have found during their travels. The students are then asked to start carrying a digital camera or a digital video recorder or to start walking with the camera feature of their phones loaded while they walk around campus to mediate a visual representation of their average day.⁶ After students have had a few days to digest what they found during their travels, they are instructed to spend some time reviewing their notes and their visuals. Students are specifically asked during this activity to look for anything that seems odd, contributes to an unpleasant learning or travel situation, or poses potential risks to their or other people's health or safety. These activities encourage students to notice the subtleties of the everyday landscape surrounding their travels and how the physical structures supporting, hindering, or controlling their on-campus travels relate to their overall learning experiences.

Stepping into the role of active users and using walking as a tactical activity provides students with the opportunity to discover for themselves how overlooked features of the university's growth plan impact their daily learning experiences. The activities described above provide the students with an active way to hunt through their experiences to identify something very similar to what Bruno Latour labels as a "Blackbox" in *Pandora's Hope*. Latour uses the term "Blackbox" as a way to explain how "scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success" (604). Exploring the mundane features of a physical environment is not much different, espe-

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cially when the students confront a complication as simple as walking into a computer classroom and having to use a broken or unusable chair while completing an in-class assignment. Although somewhat oversimplified, the experience of discovering a collection of broken chairs supplies a segue into something larger. Confronted with a tangible problem, students begin questioning the importance of some highly regarded features of the university's growth plan once they compare them to the overlooked complications and problems with the physically mundane features of the campus they found. As one student pointed out, potentially having to sit on the floor of a computer classroom to complete their work or take a test because of the number of broken chairs in the room seems problematic when compared to how much the university spent adding a new rock climbing wall to the university's recreation center.

With the usability of the mundane as a focus of discovery, students begin to understand how the changes made to their physical campus impact the lives of other university stakeholders. As critically aware dwellers, they see things they may have never noticed and start to view the physical features of the shared university-sponsored product differently. The students start to realize how interconnected they are to a shared "public" and begin to understand Warner's argument: "Belonging to a public seems to require at least minimal participation, even if it is patient or notional, rather than a permanent state of being. Merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member" (71). By immersing themselves in the process of discovery and finding something problematic to study, students recognize how their own experiences interacting with the campus compare with those of other stakeholders and how those experiences are often, if not always, shared experiences. At this point in the process, I have the students complete an activity where they can practice converting their findings into a dialogue they can use to become active participants, or at least critics, of the public rhetoric surrounding their shared dwelling experiences.

After students discover a potential focus for the usability-based project, I invite them to briefly share what they found with their peers. Before this activity I explain to the students that the purpose of the activity is to get their peers, possibly other students who have also had to work in broken chairs, interested in their topics and to convince them that what they found is in fact unusable. Most of my students have responded by using the strategies they learned during the comparative assignment—

most notably, the rhetorical move of helping other students understand their frustrations by comparing those frustrations to a nonproblematic feature of campus. To help their peers visualize why their discoveries are problematic, the students usually begin by presenting something familiar to their peers before describing how what they found is different, unique, or unusable. In other words, by first including something familiar in their presentations they are actually attempting to build a dialectical bridge for their audience (Bartholomae).⁷ In some respects, what students unfamiliar with Birmingham bring to the discourse illustrates one additional powerful feature of the tactic being offered. Students new to the area view the campus through fresh eyes. Unlike the students who grew up around UAB, newer students are not constrained by any sort of conditionality or redundancies attributed to the everydayness of physical structures surrounding and supporting their travels. Getting the local and nonlocal students involved in a common dialogue is the first step in preparing them to craft a public argument or critique. The experience provides students with an opportunity to practice persuading other stakeholders who view the campus differently to accept their interpretations.

Presenting their discoveries to their peers also provides the students with an additional rhetorical opportunity similar to what Debra Hawhee describes as “invention-in-the-middle.” “Invention-in-the-middle,” according to Hawhee, “assumes that rhetoric is a performance” and “is not a beginning [. . .] but a middle, an in-between, a simultaneously interruptive and connective hooking-in to circulating discourse” (24). On the day students give their presentations I remind them that part of their task is to engage their audience and get them interested in the topics. I tell students that facts are important and should be shared, but their struggles and their experiences should be the main focus of their presentations. This last-minute piece of instruction is intentional. I want the students, in that moment, to “think on their feet” and adjust what they are about to say as they most likely would if they were giving the presentations to university officials. To add one further complication to the situation, I also invite and encourage the audience members to respond during the presentations as a way to show their support or question particular statements made by the presenter as they occur. This is, admittedly, not a situation the students are used to encountering in a typical classroom when giving presentations. But, as I explain below, this type of interaction and free-flowing dialogue where

everyone in the room has the opportunity to become part of the discourse has led to a positive transition in the way students view and eventually articulate their topics at the end of the project cycle.

During the presentations, a particular type of “turn,” to use Hawhee’s term, often starts to develop within the discourse surrounding each presentation. To paraphrase a recent example, one of my students presented her experiences using a broken chair in a heavily used computer classroom. The next student presented on the difficulty of taking tests in lecture halls with bolted-to-the-floor row seats and attached foldout desktops too small to support the activity of writing in a bluebook. Rather quickly, most of the other students in the class began shouting out affirmations and vocalized their own experiences with the objects the two presenters had described. Then, someone suddenly shouted out, “This ain’t right.” At this moment, which is a typical occurrence during this activity, the dialogue shifted, and students were no longer talking about unusable chairs. Instead, the student narratives started shifting toward arguments regarding the inability to effectively learn in a classroom where they are physically unable to perform. The students, without any additional encouragement from me, shifted the dialogue toward larger questions. The students started questioning why school administrators and other stakeholders were more concerned with building fancy new dorms and expensive rock climbing walls and not concerned with something as simple as providing their students with usable learning spaces. As in the example class session, and every time I have used the assignment, the shift not only disrupts and changes the presentations but helps students convert their arguments from personal problems toward arguments intended to grip a public audience. As Hawhee claims, “It is only through the timely, *kairotic* encounter that ‘turns’ happen, different *ethoi* emerge, and *logos* becomes action [...] words make themselves deeds” (32). At the end of the presentation day students understand how something seemingly insignificant yet important to their college educational experiences, something as mundane as a chair, can actually function as a springboard into public critique of the university’s growth plan.

The last preparatory activities I ask students to complete are unofficial and informal usability tests on the problematically mundane feature of the campus they identified. During this activity I ask the students to interview other campus dwellers and watch other people attempt to “use” the problematic feature of the campus they identified as a way to triangulate their

findings and make sure what they found is not just isolated to their own experiences.⁸ Like researching a topic for an academic essay, the students are gathering the source material they will need to make and support their arguments. By watching other people become users and by recording how they interact with the mundane, students are actually conducting the type of primary research technical communication specialists conduct all the time. Observing “real” people using a product, recording what they “saw,” and then presenting that information to a client is how usability specialists convince a client to revise the products they offer. Having other people test out their hypotheses associated with the mundane features of their shared dwelling spaces also emphasizes the purpose of conducting research. The students cannot predict the results, in most cases, or know the results of their research activities before they conduct this step of the process. The not knowing before it happens helps the students understand how conducting research, in any context, starts with a question and is not just an activity used to prove a predefined result. In addition, during this part of the research process, the students are gathering the data they will need to start preparing an informed critique of the dominant public perception of their surroundings with the power to persuade, as I explain in the next section, a large number of stakeholders.

Mediating the Mundane

UAB’s plan to reconstruct its campus is far from finished, and according to university-sponsored rhetoric, the process could take another decade to complete. Physical changes to a college campus often have long-lasting implications regarding how students interact with the structures supporting their education and the services provided by the university. Like the changes the university has already made to the physical structures supporting its campus, future changes will produce a new set of challenges students will need to negotiate in order to have successful on-campus experiences. At the same time, the students currently have limited options to publically share how the physical changes to the campus impact their educational experiences. So much rides on their educational experiences, as they can easily impact the rest of the students’ adult lives. It seems problematic, then, to not offer students opportunities to discover alternative pathways toward becoming advocates of how those experiences are shaped. The rhetorical invention tactic I have presented offers the powerful ability to

help students take their concerns public. Included below is one potential starting point I have used to help students interject their voices into discussions concerning the reconstruction of their college campus. It is based on having students craft a rhetorical response to the following question: Are the changes to UAB's campus actually beneficial to your academic success and plans for graduation?

After students complete the activities included in the previous section, they shift their focus toward other research practices. During this phase of the project students research what has been shared publicly about the university's growth plan and the usability-based problem they found. In the past, students have found details about the university's growth plan in press releases, news stories from the campus newspaper archives, and back issues of the alumni magazine. To find information about their specific topics, however, students have had to dig a little deeper and have found sources very similar to the types of mundane documents Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber describe in their 2011 *CCC* article, "Ecological, Pedagogical, Public Rhetoric." In their article, Rivers and Weber, without deflating the significance of the major players involved and their heroic acts, offer an ecological reading of the Montgomery bus boycott to demonstrate how mundane texts—such as meeting minutes, post-event flyers, monthly newsletters, and handwritten signs—helped propel the movement: "logistical and organizational texts to keep the boycott going, information and motivational texts to inspire the boycotts, and advocacy, public relations, ally building, fundraising, and legal texts to represent the movement to various other publics" (200). The ecological analysis of the Montgomery bus boycott offered by Rivers and Weber is important to my argument because it shows how overlooked, mundane artifacts often connect to and support much larger issues. Some examples of the mundane artifacts my students have found include annual reports, the university's master plan, organizational flyers and brochures, and maps illustrating where some on-campus services have been displaced while their former locations were demolished and reconstructed.

Once students further research their topics, they prepare a text-based argument incorporating the visual evidence they collected during the activities described in the previous section and produce a new visual intended for a very specific stakeholder population: their student government representatives. I include the second rhetorical artifact because—even

though highly descriptive texts can sometimes replace the need for visuals in certain contexts—when delving into the realm of usability, showing, rather than telling, is how usability researchers get major stakeholders to recognize problems within the product under study. At this stage in the process students determine how to mediate their arguments. Once they complete this step in the process, they are then required to present their arguments to the rest of the class as if presenting them to their student government representatives. Subsequently, I added one additional multimodal component to the assignment: I require students to revise their arguments as part an end-of-the-semester revision portfolio.

To revise their usability-based argument for their end-of-the-semester revision portfolio, students have two options. They can convert the visual they already created into a product that can easily be distributed through social media, or they can create a new visual, as a way to get other university stakeholders interested in their topic. Preparing their arguments for a few different mediums has provided students with similar rhetorical opportunities that Jody Shipka argues are present in a “multimodal task-based framework.” As Shipka states, “composition courses present students with the opportunity to begin structuring the occasions for, as well as the reception and delivery of, the work they produce” (279). During the revision work, the students need to make a series of choices. They first determine the most effective way to visualize their arguments for their audiences and, based on those choices, then decide on the most effective way to deliver their arguments to those audiences. The decisions they make regarding the visualization and delivery of their arguments are based on their own understandings of how they think their audiences need to “see” the visual evidence they collected. Some of the visualizations that students have used include voice recordings coupled with pictures of campus maps highlighting mislabeled buildings, university-published maps of campus still showing the locations of on-campus services in buildings no longer standing, or, live video showcasing the impact their identified problem had on how students navigate campus between classes.

The revision work students complete for their end-of-semester portfolio has also created an opportunity for them to explore the production of multimodal texts, which most of them have had limited experience developing. Because a large number of my students have not had previous experience editing live video, many students chose to add their revised

arguments as voiceovers to PowerPoint or Prezi presentations and then convert those products into stand-alone videos. Other students, on the other hand, totally abandoned what they originally did and digitally recorded mini documentaries, which have included video footage of the students walking around campus filming other students struggling with their identified

Analyzing how people might receive their finished product has allowed students to merge together different modes of communication into a single communication act capable of connecting with multiple groups of university stakeholders.

problem and gathered interviews of other campus dwellers during their travels. Some of those students even had friends drive them around campus so they could quickly record different angles of the identified problem. Analyzing how people might receive their finished product has allowed students to merge together different modes of communication into a single communication act capable of connecting with multiple groups of univer-

sity stakeholders. The videos and images help the students' audiences see the frustrations they have with UAB's campus unfold in front of their eyes and feel those frustrations as the students experience them. Although the students have produced their rhetorical artifacts to be shared publicly and do upload them to social networks, I let the students decide if they wanted to take their arguments further.⁹ Many students have kept their products public for a time, and those who chose not to could very easily do so at a later date. Their products, once revised and remediated, could very easily be distributed and understood by most university stakeholders because the arguments they contain were based on a shared physical commonality.

Conclusions: Walking toward Other Campuses

Offering a usability-based assignment and incorporating the everyday practice of walking as a rhetorical invention tactic in my teaching practices has helped me address a complex issue raised by Cheryl Geisler in "Teaching the Post-Modern Rhetor: Continuing the Conversation on Rhetorical Agency." In response to Gunn and Lundberg, Geisler claims: "As rhetoricians, we have tended to assume that students come to us already positioned for rhetorical work—or, sometimes, already positioned outside of it. But does not such an assumption incorrectly accept as 'natural' students' own sense of positioning?" (110–11). The assignment I describe in this article, because it begins with walking around shared physical spaces, negotiates a middle ground

between those two extremes. Actively examining shared physical spaces and describing their experiences with other campus dwellers promotes a situation where the different levels of familiarity the students have with the campus became the foundation of classroom discussions. Those students more familiar with campus helped students new to the area understand some of the history associated with the campus. At the same time, the new arrivals helped the students with familiarity see the campus from a different perspective. The time students spent talking to each other about their discoveries is part of the “legwork,” to use Geisler’s term, included in the project, and the “unpredictability” of those conversations helped students view their topics as shared struggles.

Engaging in a common discourse has helped the local and nonlocal students collectively understand, as Frank Farmer argues, that “audiences and publics are thoroughly imbricated, dynamic, and at least partially determined by the rhetorical purposes of the speaker or writer, especially that person’s decision as to whom, precisely, her words are intended” (144). Converting their work into a stand-alone multimodal text and sharing their work with their peers gives the students the opportunity to witness how their arguments and their experiences are connected to the arguments and experiences of their peers. Watching how their peers respond to their work gives each student the opportunity to see how the decisions they made while preparing their arguments helps frame how other stakeholders view their shared experiences. Having students prepare arguments intended for stakeholders outside the classroom also provides the opportunity to illustrate that certain arguments made outside the composition classroom often need to be supported by different forms of evidence not typically included in a traditional academic essay. As students are encouraged to become actively involved in one form of public discourse, hopefully they will use the strategies they learned when becoming users and experts of their own experiences and understand they can publicly advocate for change as they continue their careers at UAB and once they leave the university.

In practice, what I have presented in this article has worked in a number of different rhetorically based writing courses—from first-year com-

Actively examining shared physical spaces and describing their experiences with other campus dwellers promotes a situation where the different levels of familiarity the students have with the campus became the foundation of classroom discussions.

position to an upper-level engineering communication course—because it is based on discourse and the idea of having students focus on “bridge building” in their work through the establishment of an argumentative commonality (Bartholomae).¹⁰ Collectively, the activities I discuss in this article form a tactic that aligns with portions of what James Berlin argues in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*. According to Berlin:

In teaching people to write and read, we are thus teaching them a way of experiencing the world. This realization requires that the writing classroom be dialogic. Only through articulating the disparate position held by members of the class can different ways of understanding the world and acting in it be discovered. (110)

The act of walking as a tactic for rhetorical invention forms the core of what I have been presenting in this article. However, what the students do with their discoveries is just as important.

Establishing the physical structures supporting a college campus as a shared space of discovery and argumentative inspiration provides students who engage in the process with a chance to increase their own perceptions of rhetorical agency and how they view their own position inside rhetorical work.

The activity of presenting their ideas to their peers and the dialogue surrounding those presentations help students shift how they discuss the impact of their discoveries. The arguments the students eventually present move from individual experience toward arguments focused on action. Establishing the physical structures supporting a college campus as a shared space of discovery and argumentative inspiration provides students who engage in the process with a chance to

increase their own perceptions of rhetorical agency and how they view their own position inside rhetorical work.¹¹

Arguing about a topic with which each student is familiar becomes a commonplace, under Welch’s definition of *topos*, within classroom discussions. The college campus becomes a common conversational topic familiar to everyone in the class. The physical structures supporting UAB’s campus function as a shared reference point from which everyone in the class can draw to engage their audience in larger arguments about shared educational spaces. As Ackerman argues, “a most profound implication of a spatial analysis of everyday life is also a most ordinary: everyday life reminds us that academics, teachers, and students all traverse a particu-

lar landscape to come to work at the university (or public school or other workplaces)” (114). Everyone in the classroom negotiates some of the same physical features before their arrival. And because UAB is an urban campus with a large percentage of students who commute to school everyday, those shared experiences of frustration sometimes start well before they set foot on UAB-owned property. Preparing multimodal texts to distribute their discoveries within social media networks also helps students gain some understanding of how digital texts function in twenty-first-century composition practices and how interconnected their work, and their own experiences, can become to much larger issues.

Additionally, the rhetorical invention tactic I present in this article is not limited to campuses experiencing the same type of growing pains UAB is experiencing. Circumstances, physical structures, and the impact of both on students’ educational experiences will obviously vary from campus to campus. But no college campus is perfect, and even small-scale changes can have long-lasting implications capable of increasing the learning potential of the students who spend time on those campuses. Introducing students to the idea of stakeholders and having them compose arguments intended for contexts outside the composition classroom helps them understand that some stakeholders need to “see” the impact of a problem before they act on the identified problem. Having students engage the physically mundane features of a college campus through the lens of “use” can uncover otherwise unseen hindrances to their educational success and can help introduce students to the possibility of using rhetoric as a vehicle of change within academic and non-academic contexts.

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Notes

1. Many professional and technical communication scholars—including Michael Salvo in “User-Centered Design and Rhetorical Methodology” and Barbara Mirel in “How Can Technical Communicators Evaluate the Usability of Artifacts?”—have also demonstrated how teaching usability can be an opportunity to introduce students to a number of different rhetorical principles.

2. Population growth rates in areas considered within a drivable distance, competition with a number of other local and in-state universities, and the enrollment trends discussed in Pérez-Peña's 2013 *New York Times* article, "College Enrollment Falls as Economy Recovers," are all contributing factors behind the restructured recruitment strategy.
3. See Bacha, "Taxonomies, Folksonomies, and Semantics: Establishing Functional Meaning in Navigational Structures."
4. For more on the history of usability studies see Jacko, *The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook*; Ramey, "A Selected Bibliography: A Beginner's Guide to Usability Testing"; Redish, "Technical Communication and Usability: Intertwined Strands and Mutual Influences"; and Johnson, Salvo, and Zoetewey, "User-Centered Technology in Participatory Culture: Two Decades 'Beyond a Narrow Conception of Usability Testing,'".
5. See Zimmerman, Muraski, and Slater, "Taking Usability Testing to the Field."
6. To help my students complete this activity, I used a grant from the English Department at UAB to purchase handheld digital video recorders for students to check out and use.
7. This argument aligns with Bartholomae, "Inventing the University," and the idea of building bridges and offering commonalities to initiate a discourse before offering something new.
8. See Rubin and Chisnell, *Handbook of Usability Testing*; Horton, *Access by Design*; and Courage and Baxter, *Understanding your Users*.
9. The fear associated with taking a product composed in a new medium public may prevent some students from engaging with the assignment, and the negatives associated with making students publish a product with which they are not yet happy or one that needs revision seems pedagogically counterproductive. Instead, the goal should be to help students understand the process, practice producing multimodal arguments, and learn about some of the platforms available to engage in public rhetoric.
10. Depending on the classroom structure, the desired pedagogical outcomes of the course, and the course level, a usability-based assignment could last an entire semester if the students start exploring possible solutions to the problems they find.
11. A usability-based assignment offers students a flexible way to find a point of entry into a much larger conversation. The tactic itself is not intended to replace what we already know about the production of texts. Instead, included in what I have presented are the intentional and interwoven echoes of the theorists, those officially addressed and those only alluded to, whose footprints

I am walking/dwelling within. Each turn that my argument has made toward offering a way of helping students with a variety of different backgrounds discover commonalities includes a nod to the past.

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