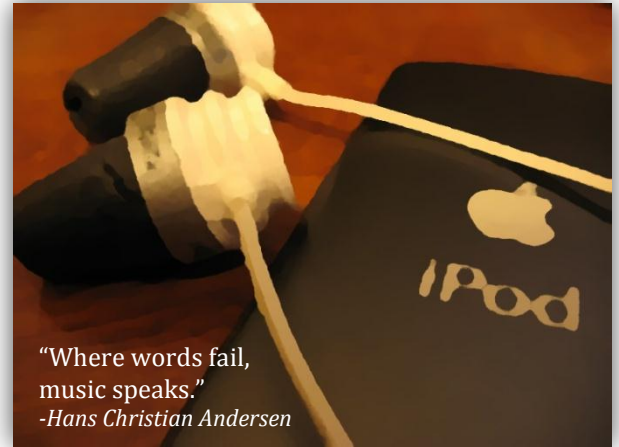


“Where Words Fail, Music Speaks”: Using Aural Essays in the Classroom

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The rhetorical power of written text combined with sound can speak beyond what either mode can communicate alone. For example, writing an essay that’s intended to be read requires different rhetorical choices than writing an essay that’s intended to be heard. To help students learn, critique, and compare these different rhetorical options and skills, it’s important to afford them the opportunity to use modes beyond traditional, written assignments. One way of achieving this is by incorporating an aural essay assignment.



Why Should I Assign an Aural Essay?

Writing remains at the center of literate and communicative practices in our technologically-driven society. In that way, students as communicators should be able to acknowledge, understand, utilize, and incorporate multiple literacies, including those that they bring with them to academia and those that will remain useful beyond an academic context. As Mayher (1990) writes, “Our new task is not to present or transmit the world of knowledge to our students, but to find, instead, new ways to help them learn how to do it for themselves” (p. 162).

These literacies encompass a myriad of topics, ideologies, and technologies but all tend to adhere to basic principles of composition and communication relevant within and beyond the classroom: audience, clarity, purpose, function, form, etc. As instructors, we can make the invisible technologies visible and help students understand the assumptions, affordances,

constraints, and rhetorical implications of different modes of communication—modes that are each relevant to writing, communication, and pedagogy, especially in a digital age. By helping students become cognizant and reflective producers of many modes of communication, we can help them become better, more informed consumers, producers, and members of society.

Students are surrounded by visual and aural literacies, and it's important that we, as instructors, acknowledge and employ those literacies within our classrooms—not only to recognize the changing nature of writing and communication, but to recognize that literacy is so much more than the ability to encode and decode letters on a page. In *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning*, Lankshear and Knobel (2003) argue that “performance epistemology” will help students reach *critical learning* or “a reflective way that can lead to critique [and] novel meanings” (Gee, 2003, p. 41): “This is an epistemology of rule breaking and innovation: of knowing *how to proceed* in the absence of existing models and exemplars” (Lankshear & Knobel, p. 173). In other words, in order for our students to be able to understand and independently employ rhetorical modes relevant to communication in our society—diction, format, layout, color, sound, etc.—they need opportunities to practice and make use of their already-existing literacies while incorporating new literacies and using those multi-faceted modes to make rhetorical, multimodal choices.

Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) write, “In an increasingly technological world, students need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading (consuming) texts employing multiple modalities, but also in *composing* in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successfully within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, and geopolitical borders” (p. 3). Similarly, in “The Effects of New Technologies on Writing and Writing Processes” MacArthur (2008) writes,

“The integration of text with graphics, video, and sound may encourage schools to expand the concept of literacy to include a variety of media . . . electronic technologies engage students as writers or producers rather than just as readers or consumers” (p. 248). Audio essays are one means of harnessing a traditionally non-academic literacy for academic purposes. Asking students to make cognizant, informed, rhetorical choices when composing a text that will be heard requires them to think critically and reflect about traditional rhetorical concepts—audience, diction, theme, organization—as well as aural rhetorical concepts—sound, timing, music, voice, rhythm. Recording their spoken words and incorporating a song along with any other sounds that they deem appropriate, students are afforded the opportunity to gain knowledge of modes including and beyond traditional academic writing—modes that, when allowed to work together, speak in a way that words and music alone are unable.

How Can I Incorporate an Aural Essay in my Classroom?

There are many assignments suited for incorporating audio essays into the writing classroom—oral histories, literacy biographies, personal narratives, etc. Likewise, there are many software programs that allow students to create audio essays. One such program is Audacity, free, open source software that you and your students can download at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>. There, you can also find specific tutorials and demonstrations to help you and your students become familiarized with the program.

Assignment: First, assign a traditional 5-6 page essay in which students discuss what their personal theme song might be. This essay asks students to choose the one song that best represents their lives or one aspect of their lives or their personalities—who they are as students, artists, athletes, parents, workers, etc. This essay should quote specific lyrics that tie to an event (or events) in their lives, demonstrating why they feel this particular song best represents an

aspect of who they are. For example, one student, feeling discouraged about his career path may choose to write about the song *What Do You Do With a B.A. in English?* from the Broadway musical *Avenue Q*. Another student may choose to write about a country song titled *Redneck Woman*, because she is proud of her Appalachian heritage and her ability to race dirt bikes and four wheelers competitively with her male friends. The essays tend to be as creative and original as the students in your classroom.

After students write a traditional narrative essay about their personal theme song, ask them to rework that essay into an aural essay that they will read aloud and record. Before using Audacity to record their essays and incorporate their theme songs, students can listen to sample aural essays (previous students' projects and NPR's StoryCorps (<http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps>) provide excellent models. Students can also work in groups revising their conventional essays while discussing how they might best convey their purposes. For example, do they want to include specific lyrics from the song or have the song play continuously while they include a voiceover?

Ask students to create a project that conforms to time constraints (2-4 minutes depending on class size) in order to demonstrate the importance of being concise and meeting requirements. Also ask students to keep a process journal to document their rhetorical choices. They can use their process journal to help them write a 2-3 page reflection that asks them to consider, for instance, why they chose to include one paragraph from their traditional, written essay but to omit another or why they chose to begin their essay with lyrics rather than their own, spoken words. Asking students to reflect further helps them become cognizant of the effects and implications of their rhetorical choices. Completed essays are presented to the class who assesses each essay along with the instructor using a basic rubric.

Aural Essay Assignment

Step 1: Have a copy of the “final” draft of your theme song essay.

Step 2: You will workshop your theme song essay in small groups and condense, edit, and revise your essay so that it retains your intended effect/purpose/meaning but can be read in 2 - 3 minutes (roughly 300-400 words depending on how quickly you speak). Remember to allow time to incorporate your theme song: Will you include specific lyrics that you discuss? Will you play your song continuously in the background? Both? Why or why not?

Step 3: Continue to work with Audacity and create an aural presentation including your theme song, your spoken essay, and any other sounds/effects you choose. For a database of licensed sounds check out <http://freesound.iaa.upf.edu/index.php>.

Step 4: Keep a process journal documenting your rhetorical choices. You will use that journal to write a 2-3 page reflection once you’ve completed your aural essay. Consider the following questions: What did you choose to cut from your conventional essay? Why? Did you choose to add information that wasn’t included previously? How did you choose to incorporate your theme song? Did you use snippets, specific lyrics, or the entire song? Did you choose to include any other sounds or effects?

Step 5: Your completed Audacity project is due _____. Come prepared to play your presentation for the class. Be sure that the file works on a computer other than your own before coming to class. Plan ahead, because I, along with your peers, will be assessing your project during the presentation.

Aural Essay Rubric

Name: _____

Timely presentation (4 – 5 minutes)	4	3	2	1						
Introduction provided orienting information and overall idea of the essay	4	3	2	1						
Seamless integration of song/sounds and essay	4	3	2	1						
Overall thesis/focus of the essay was clear	4	3	2	1						
Included personal experiences/observations and lyrics to back up thesis	4	3	2	1						
Spoke with appropriate rhythm, speed, intonation, and volume	4	3	2	1						
Appropriate use of sound effects, diction, and theme song	4	3	2	1						
Created a sense of organization	4	3	2	1						
Apparent consideration for context, audience, and purpose	4	3	2	1						
Created a sense of closure/ending	4	3	2	1						
Average score from classmates	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Total Score: _____ / 50

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