

Growing Up With Electracy

Sarah J. Arroyo, *Enculturation*, 2016

Video Transcript:

Arroyo: Electracy arrived for me in the fall of 2000 in Victor Vitanza's Rhetorical Invention doctoral seminar at the University of Texas at Arlington when I read Greg Ulmer's book *Heuretics*. In my academic life, I was then but an infant, playing around with ideas and concepts, looking for my place in the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and crawling through the theories and practices of my mentors.

Electracy encompasses the cultural, institutional, pedagogical, and ideological implications inherent in the transition from a culture of print literacy to a culture saturated with electronic media, regardless of the presence of actual machines. I have never been a programmer or done much coding. I was not drawn to electracy because I was a technological whiz; in fact, I'm ashamed to admit that my technological capabilities were so limited at that time that I only used email and browsed the web for research purposes.

I was drawn to the idea of the electracy apparatus shift that was beginning to permeate our culture, and I sensed that electracy practices would become as important as literate practices in no time. Without the technological capability to articulate these intuitions, I was drawn to electracy for its theoretical and cultural implications. I understood electracy to be more than a set of skills, and I watched as electracy began permeating many institutions of our lives.

The following semester I took the one and only UT-Arlington version of Vitanza's seminar Rhetorics/Poetics and Cultural/Digital Studies. Despite technological limitations, in that seminar we were tasked to think about how we might visualize electracy and the theories we studied through the medium of digital video, or how we would perform critique when no critical distance could be established. We did have the capability to produce digital video (but not necessarily share it), and we invented ways to practice performative scholarship.

These performative video tasks opened up the possibility for me not only to expand my theoretical knowledge by having to articulate it through the use of imagery and sound, but they also forced me to get up to speed with digital moviemaking with no actual direct instruction. They also forced me to rely on my colleagues and strangers in discussion forums to figure out how to do everything in iMovie, including having to go into the codex and debug my movie file a few times.

What became central for me in this scenario was that *collaboration was not only required, it was inherent in the entire process*. We simply opened up the programs and got started together. Learning programs and platforms as I was using them became a staple of my

approach. I love to tell my students today that we all had to share our professor's one computer to complete these videos, and we had to save them on giant Zip disks.

The videos we created were called "post-critical objects," after Ulmer's seminal essay "The Object of Post-Criticism." The goal was to articulate a practice that does not rely on critical distance or linear argumentation—to perform electracy. I found my notebook from that seminar; I hadn't opened it since I wrote my dissertation. A list of questions I wrote back then completely struck me since they have guided my scholarly and pedagogical development, whether I knew it or not.

Here is a sampling of these questions:

*Why videos in a rhetoric class?

*How would I answer this question?

*Why writing with light? Film?

*What would be the argument for it?

And a short blurb that simply said: move into the object and reflect IT, not reflect on.

"Reflecting objects" rather than reflecting ON objects became my practice for both scholarship and teaching. Over the years I have replaced the descriptor "post-critical" with "participatory" in terms of objects of study and pedagogies.

I do collaborative video scholarship with grad students, former grad students, and colleagues.

After years of collaboration, we realized that we have created a rhythm and style in our video composition process. Similar to Ulmer's quest in the 1980s to "televise Derridean theory" (see *Teletheory*), we make videos reflecting theoretical concepts like choric invention, desiring production, speaking as a listener, producing as a listener, and the dark side of electracy and its offshoot for video culture: videocy, or video intelligence.

Videocy, as Ulmer predicted back in 1989 (*Teletheory*), has become a legitimate form of learning. I have turned to the study of videocy for several years now as another form or offshoot of digital rhetoric.

By steeping our courses and scholarship in the study of videocy, my collaborators and I have honed and reshaped methodologies for video production, and we have developed burgeoning rhetorics for videocy. We typically begin with a passage of text or controlling metaphor and then start assembling assets for the video that will illustrate and perform the text or reflect the metaphor.

The process is fluid, associative, and demonstrates what Henry Jenkins calls "meaningful appropriation" (*Confronting the Challenges* xiv): one of twelve new media literacy skills he argues is necessary for students to engage with in today's classrooms. We engage in remix,

repurposing, and reappropriating existing works by cutting them out of their original contexts and placing them into new contexts with different purposes.

We've noticed that our students are beginning to remix and repurpose our work.

They are engaging in these emerging methods whether they are aware of it or not. Seeing our own work remixed and performed in a different context starts the process all over again for us. In the examples playing now, some of the footage is obviously taken from our collaborative video "The Dancing Floor" as well as other published videos, while others are less apparent but are still iterations of our work (Arroyo and Alaei). As scholars, these iterations allow us to look at our own work from different perspectives and gain new insights on it. As teachers, these iterations help to encourage and facilitate future inventions with future students.

We see one of the central arguments about teaching in electracy that I put forward in my book *Participatory Composition* emerge: "any pedagogical situation should be considered as a scene for inventions to come into appearance by creating the conditions for participation. We relinquish the discourse of mastery. We place value on the aspect of chance and emerging networks" (Arroyo 111).

The most exciting part of this work is seeing ways our students have embraced electracy scholarship through remixing and reappropriation and participated in creating rhetorics and methodologies for electracy.

Electracy is a way of life. It is not simply a set of skills. I end with one of my former students, Suzan Gridley, who articulates this when she reflects on how my approach to digital rhetoric has shaped her teaching.

Gridley: Reflecting on the way your Digital Rhetoric course has influenced my teaching has turned out to be a difficult thing for me to do because I realize those influences are not a separately, identifiable part of me. Instead, they are totally integrated into the way I think, the way I teach; I mean, it's not like there are a specific set of strategies that I apply on top of some other foundational knowledge for teaching composition. I guess I created my own knowledge out of the ideas that resonated with me, *and that now they are me*.

Arroyo: I am all grown up now, but electracy will continue to emerge for my collaborators and me. We will never be satisfied with our developing rhetorics for electracy and videocy and will continue this work and see where it takes us.