NOTE: For brevity’s sake, I will not be discussing the syllabus here nor Unit One at any great length, since I have already done so in AL860 and have changed little in either; this includes textbook choice, goals for the course, and Unit One. I will mention only the changes.

This has been the biggest course development challenge I have ever faced. There are several reasons this is such a challenge: no one has taught this before at my institution, I’ve never taught this before at all, and, of course, I simply have trouble envisioning how things will go and keep changing my mind. Where I have ended up is only slightly where I began.

From AL 860
I kept the same textbook, since I spent considerable time this summer researching books and am happy with the one I chose. I’m relying on it quite a bit, which I always find myself doing when I first teach a class: I’m using the genres it covers, which I found to be unique to this book. It also offered a much more comprehensive emphasis on the visual, incorporating it into every chapter.

The only syllabus changes made were to add a required thumb drive and to change assignment of points for the course: during 860, I had not yet decided how this would break down. I have decided to grade according to unit portfolios: rather than grading each element of the unit, I want to grade the three elements together: the traditional paper, the digital remediation project, and the metacommentary/journal. I feel that to grade them separately puts too much emphasis on them as individual documents without taking into consideration how each of these affects and is affected by the other.

Unit One has changed in two ways: One, after discussion with you about the course and my vision of it, I decided it was an excellent idea to have the first visual rhetoric unit focus on their research subject rather than something unrelated to what they will be doing later. It gives the course a more connected feel, and it simply makes sense. However, I realized that students could possibly choose a subject that has no website. So I decided they could analyze “the visual representation” of the subject: if they have a website, great. If not, they can analyze any visual representations they can find. The second change is that this unit now has the added elements of the remediation (the PowerPoint presentation) and the journal. These elements are the same across units. Additionally, this first unit will have the research proposal and the annotated bib. At first I felt that this was too much in one unit yet it had the same point equivalent as the other units. However, after more consideration, I decided it
was okay: the paper and remediation are easier than the next two, so I think it
balances out well.

Reasons for the Unit Structure
This course is English 200, normally called “Advanced Rhetoric,” one for those
students who want to further their writing skills. Traditionally, the emphasis in the
course is on refining style. Because of time constraints, I am usurping the course
for now: next fall it will be English 230: Digital Rhetoric, and these constraints will
pretty much vanish. But for now, I felt obligated to cover some of the usual
material. I spoke to several people at Alma about the course, what ENG 200
usually was like, what the goals for the course are, and how they felt about
some of my ideas. After having these discussions, I decided to do things a little
differently than I had imagined them this summer. One of the main
considerations was that I needed the students to be doing more “writing,” i.e.
Word document papers with lots of words and critical thinking, etc., I originally
had not intended for students to do as much traditional writing, but after these
discussions I felt it was important.

Part of this comes from the fact that the students who take this course have a
mixture of backgrounds and interests. For one, ENG 200 is required for all foreign
language majors. They need the course to hone their grammar skills. It’s also
recommended for business majors. English majors take it, as well as a random
group from education, history, and the sciences. It’s also what Alma calls a
“quill” course: one that requires a “significant” amount of writing. After taking all
this into account, I feel that this course has the necessary emphasis on
traditional writing—they will write three “traditional” papers (although they will
be written collaboratively) and during this time we will talk about the elements
of style and grammar needed for the “normal” 200 course. In addition to this,
the cross between the traditional and new media accomplishes what DeVoss,
Cushman, and Grabill discuss in their article “Infrastructure and Composing: the
When of New-Media Writing.” They argue, “If students are to be effective and
critical new-media composers, they should be equipped with ways in which
they can consider and push at practices and standards in strategic ways” (16).
This course allows room for that pushing.

Merging the Traditional and the Technical
One of my main goals for this course—especially considering the above
constraints—was to help students be both critics of and producers of these “new
media” texts. Mary Hocks, in “Understanding Visual Rhetoric,” talks about the
incorporation of the visual into the textual, saying “This approach to literacy
education reinforces the value of teaching students to think of themselves not
just as critics but as designers of knowledge” (644). As we have seen ourselves in
AL 881, it isn’t enough to just study the texts others have created; it’s essential to
become creators of these texts as well.
I felt the best way to go about this was to have them write something in a traditional mode then “rewrite” it in a new media. The Odell and Katz textbook has some great writing assignments, so I thought I’d take advantage of these and have the students write at least three of these. The first, for unit one, is the analysis; I decided for the first unit to not give them choices. I wanted them to experience remediation before having choices. So everyone will write an analysis of the visual representations of their subject. From there they will make PowerPoint presentations, which I decided is a pretty basic and essential digital tool, and everyone needs to know how to do it—and do it well. This unit is meant to get their feet wet learning to transition a piece of writing to a digital environment. I feel it has what Hocks calls a “balanced rhetorical approach,” which “offer[s] students experiences both in the analytic process of critique, which scrutinizes conventional expectations and power relations, and in the transformative process of design, which can change power relations by creating a new vision of knowledge” (644-645). By first analyzing their subjects’ visual representations and then having to visually represent that analysis, students will have this balance.

The Research Component
While they are working on this first unit (which I don’t think will be too incredibly difficult) they will also be doing their research outside of class for the rest of the unit (see the “Research” handout). After again discussing various research ideas with several colleagues, I really liked the idea of having them do empirical research rather than writing about something someone else has already researched. The idea of remediation, and thus the idea of new media, needs to have a purpose; I don’t want my students to transfer their traditional writing into a new medium for no reason. Anne Wysocki, in her article “Opening New Media to Writing,” discusses her definition of “new media” and says:

I think we should call ‘new media texts’ those that have been made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts and who then highlight the materiality: such composers design texts that help readers/consumers/viewers stay alert to how any text—like its composer and readers—doesn’t function independently of how it is made and in what contexts. Such composers design texts that make as overtly visible as possible the values they embody. (15)

I imagined that if they did some other secondary research project, this would be much more difficult. What better way for students to understand the importance of materiality than to have them create texts—“new media” texts like pamphlets and iMovies—that will actually be used? My hope was for them to get a chance at authentic writing: when they create these remediations, I envision them creating products that they will share with their subjects and that their subjects will possibly use. For example, if they create a pamphlet, they can take this pamphlet to their subject and offer it to them as a genuine document
they can use. Hopefully researching while they work on the first unit will give them plenty of time to research while not holding up class time too much. There will only be so much research they could do from class anyway, so I thought this way they have a lot of time to find what they need and compile their findings. It seems to me, then, that this idea of empirical research, written traditionally then remediated, accomplishes all these things: technology for a purpose (making the technology fit the rhetorical purpose), emphasizing materiality, and creating an authentic writing experience.

Students are choosing their own topics/subjects for research for several reasons: they have to work with it all semester, so working with something they are interested in makes good sense; the variety of topics/subjects will be broader and more interesting; and I really couldn’t come up with a topic I was happy with. I chose to make some research topic parameters so that they would choose their topic well and make it workable for the projects we have planned. For one, they needed a topic that required some sort of empirical or original research—two primary sources. This will ensure that their topic is relevant, contemporary, and localized. Also it ensures that their last project is “publishable”—that they can do something with it outside of the classroom, which is an essential component of that last unit. The other very intentional parameter I put in place was the requirement that some of their research be presented visually in a chart or graph of some sort. This will require them to have some statistics or information that can be presented visually. I am really hoping that these parameters guide their topic choices well.

I decided to have them begin the process of researching by using the wiki as a space where they could post ideas, see what ideas others had, and make partner choices as well, but do this without locking themselves into anything for a while. I don’t know how this will pan out, but in theory it sounds like a great idea.

**Unit Two – Collaborative Writing**

My main objective for the second unit was to have them write collaboratively: I believe it is a skill they very much need to learn but seldom do. It fosters creativity, forces students to think more carefully about their writing choices, and gives students the social practice of writing together that happens so often once they leave academia. Googledocs is a great way to do this, as it allows students to write collaboratively, make notes and comments separate from their writing, allows me to oversee the project, yet keeps it private from the rest of the class until they are prepared to share it. I had thought of having them simply write in the wiki, but these affordances don’t exist in that space. Googledocs seemed a much better option.
So I came up with this idea of having three units, each that begins with a paper and ends with a digital project. It is not at all what I had begun with, but it really seemed to make a lot of sense. There are four genre options in the book besides the analysis—report, profile, instructions, and proposals. I like all these options, but having them write all of these was too much. So I decided that having them choose a report or profile for the second unit would work well: each depends on the subject they choose, and one makes a lot more sense than the other depending on the topic choice. For example, if they have chosen to do something like “teenage binge drinking on campus” as their topic, a report makes sense and a profile doesn’t. However, if they have chosen a possible future career, profiling someone who is in that career makes perfect sense. So I paired these two genres together: either choice requires that students do a very basic overview of their research.

Originally I had them choose between writing a report or a profile on their subject and then remediating this into a collage or webpage. But it didn’t seem that these two options were the best fit, and after discussing this with Danielle, I shifted options between units 2 and 3. Now they can transfer their report or profile to a collage or a pamphlet. These two options seem more equal in time and effort. I want them all to learn to do both but wanted to give them the choice. These two seemed to make the most sense given the genre options: a report or a profile could transition nicely into a pamphlet or collage.

Unit Three and the Portfolio
For the third unit, I paired up instructions and proposals as the last two options for unit three: each of these genres is meant to very specifically reach an audience outside academia—or at least outside the classroom. I wanted this genuine audience experience, and I’d like the students to be able to do something with their projects beyond the classroom. So I chose the iMovie and website as their possible project options. My original pairing was very unsatisfactory to me—the iMovie and the pamphlet—but the iMovie and website feel much better. Everyone, again, will have to make both—at least initially—but then will choose one to polish and submit for “publication.”

Overall I’m pretty pleased with the way this has turned out, although only actually teaching it will let me know. The fact that there are three units is also helpful because I have two major units in the 101 class I’m teaching, so they won’t have their work due at the same time. It will be staggered and make it easier on me as I finish up my MSU coursework and prepare for exams (yikes!).

Concerns and Potential Problems
I have, thankfully, ironed out some of the problems this course inherently invited. For one, at first I was going to be teaching this in a classroom with no computers. But I got luck—and pushy—and got the only computer lab in my building. I also
had to make sure the lab had the software students would need, as well as available space in "Othello," our web space. Unfortunately, this may turn out to be a problem down the road: I just received an email last week asking us to clean out our Othello accounts if there was anything in there we weren't using, since it was "almost full." I couldn't believe it. I also know how much I don't like Alma's CMS, so most of the problems with that have been solved by using a wiki. Submission of projects, however, may present a bigger problem than I can anticipate.

Then there is the MAC issue—all the computers in this lab are MACs. I'm very comfortable with a MAC, but I know a lot of students are not. I am concerned that we may end up spending valuable time at the beginning of the semester familiarizing students with the MACs rather than getting things done. I gave them the option of bringing in their laptop PC if they want, but then they have to have all the software. I have no way to know how big of a problem this will be until class begins.

But as DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill discuss, there are many infrastructure issues that can arise. I know Alma's server goes down pretty regularly—and without warning. Our computer infrastructure works a little differently than MSU's does: each student logs on to their account, which essentially logs them into Othello, but the software installed is based on the computer itself rather than from the mainframe like MSU’s is—this is comforting, since I know what software I have available and that it won't go anywhere. And when students are working on these computers, whatever they save is saved to their Othello account, as long as they are logged in. This will prevent lost work and frustrations from crashing etc.

After thinking through some of the potential hazards, though, (thanks to the DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill piece—so many things I couldn’t anticipate!) I have added to the syllabus a requirement for all students to have a thumb drive with 1G to back up all their work, and I will remind them to do it every single day. I hate relying on servers. Then I figure that even if the servers are down, the computers will still work and class won’t be completely impossible.

As for students loading their work onto the server (publishing it), Othello is incredibly simple from a MAC. Once you are logged on, there are several folders in your file. One is called “sites" and all we have to do is save our pages or images or files then click and drag them to this folder. The file is copied there and that’s it. Fortunately, this simple procedure eliminates all the ftp stuff students might have to learn (that I’m stuck doing from my PC at home) and makes it pretty simple.
Of course, since I have never taught a course like this before, I know I will come across issues I never anticipated, problems that I will struggle to solve, and walls that may be difficult to break through. Knowing this, I will always have to have some back-up options for class for any day when technology suddenly goes wacky, and I’ll have to be flexible and perhaps give up some of the visions for my course, as Ellen did. I’m lucky that the IT office is right across the hall from the lab, so I can nab someone easily if we have hardware problems. I plan on keeping a log of the course and how things go, so that when I teach this again—and for the sake of any other faculty at Alma who may want to teach a course like this—I will be able to plan better and anticipate some of the issues I will face.

AL881 has been essential to the building of this course. The readings guided many of my decisions and most of my pedagogical choices in shaping the course, but helped me understand the many issues that teaching with technology encompasses. On the surface, I think much of this is invisible, especially to other faculty who may not have taught in this environment before, but I plan on making it quite visible by sharing my experience with my colleagues so we can all benefit. Right now I’m pushing for a writing lab; I’ve been pretty fortunate so far, so here’s hoping!