

## CHAPTER 10.

# SITES OF DIGITAL WRITING AND COMMUNITY: ANNE GERE AND THE SWEETLAND DIGITAL RHETORIC COLLABORATIVE

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Founded in 2012, the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative (DRC) comprises a community webspace for teachers, researchers, and students of digital rhetoric and an open access book series and book prize with the University of Michigan Press.<sup>1</sup> As of late 2023, the DRC has published almost a dozen books and supported more than fifty graduate student fellows chosen from across the country to collaborate on DRC projects. An eight-member advisory board provides guidance across all aspects of this work. As DRC co-directors, Anne Gere, Simone Sessolo, and I know of many professional and scholarly collaborations that began in the fellows program and continue to flourish, and we have seen DRC books win major awards in our field.<sup>2</sup> But the activities and impact of the collaborative itself have been neither officially researched nor documented.

This chapter begins to address this oversight by offering a narrative of the DRC's history drawn from my own records and experiences as co-founder with Anne and augmented by initial interviews with three long-term DRC collaborators, Jason Tham (Texas Tech University), Laura Gonzales (University of Florida), and Douglas Eyman (George Mason University). As a way into the many strands that comprise the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative, I'll explore here the *digital*, the *rhetorical*, and the *collaborative* as braided, interweaving themes central both to the history and the present of the DRC—and to the work and influence of Anne Ruggles Gere.

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1 Visit the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative website at <https://www.digitalrhetoric-collaborative.org/> and the DRC book series at the University of Michigan Press at <https://press.umich.edu/Series/S/Sweetland-Digital-Rhetoric-Collaborative>.

2 *Digital Samaritans* by Jim Ridolfo won the 2017 CCCC Research Impact Award, *Rhizcomics* by Jason Helms won the 2018 *Kairos* Best Webtext Award, and *Sites of Translation* by Laura Gonzales won the 2020 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award.

## SWEETLAND

Anne Gere was the director of the Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing at the University of Michigan (UM) from 2008–2019. During that time, she ushered in the broadest expansion of the center’s curriculum and activities since its founding as the English Composition Board in 1978. To name a few of these, she created the “Michigan Model” of directed self-placement (Gere et al., “Assessing”; Gere et al., “Local Assessment”); founded MWrite, a writing-fellows-facilitated writing-to-learn initiative in large-enrollment introductory courses (Finkens-taedt-Quinn et al.); developed courses and community college collaborations to support transfer students at Michigan (Gere et al., “Mutual Adjustments”); worked with departments across campus to study and update UM’s upper-level writing requirement (Gere et al., “Interrogating”); instituted a minor in writing with a focus in multimodal composition and electronic portfolios and conducted a major longitudinal study of it (Gere); and prompted the development of Sweetland’s first “new media writing” course, which has grown into a series of special topics courses focused on “writing with digital and social media” (“Writing 200”; “Writing 201”). All of these initiatives bear Anne’s signature but were undertaken in collaboration with Sweetland’s faculty and staff and with stakeholders around the university; further, the lengthy author lists that appear on the publications reporting the institutional research behind these initiatives stand as a testament to Anne’s mentorship of graduate students and her collaborative approach to writing.

It is the last-named of these initiatives—“new media writing” courses—I wish to begin with here, for in accounts of Anne’s scholarly and pedagogical influences, digital rhetoric is not typically on the list. Yet, as the editors observe in their introduction to this collection, “Gere’s scholarship has repeatedly broken new ground, inviting us to conceptualize our fields and sub-fields more expansively and interactively” (3). Always on top of the latest developments in writing studies, one of the first proposals Anne made as new director of the Sweetland Center for Writing was that we begin to offer courses in “new media writing,” beginning with “The Rhetoric of Blogging” in 2009. Since then, as co-founder and co-editor of the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative, Anne has helped to provide a venue for shared inquiry into digital rhetoric and digital media as well as an important publication outlet for innovative born-digital long-form projects.

So, Anne Gere as digital rhetoric innovator is one of the stories this chapter will tell.

## DIGITAL

A related story is the role of the DRC—and Anne, as co-director—in the history of academic digital publishing. Once Anne decided that Sweetland

ought to get on board with “new media” writing,<sup>3</sup> she started looking around for opportunities to make connections in the digital rhetoric community and to find Sweetland a place in this field. These efforts eventually led to Sweetland’s hosting of the 2011 Computers and Writing conference (C&W) at the University of Michigan on the theme of “Writing in Motion: Traversing Public/Private Spaces.” The conference brought Sweetland to the attention of the University of Michigan Press, which had begun the process of venturing into digital publishing in 2009 under the direction of Phil Pochoda (Jaschik; Pochoda, “University Press 2.0” and “Editor’s Note”). Soon after, the press proposed the idea of a digital publishing collaboration. To say the least, we were intrigued.

## RHETORIC

It quickly became clear that existing academic publication frameworks were not sufficient to the needs of the digital rhetoric community, which brings us to *rhetoric*. DRC board member, book prize winner, and former fellow Laura Gonzales told me how she describes writing for the DRC website to her students as “fostering these different conversations [in the field] in a more low stakes way ... without being necessarily a formal journal, but having a forum where people can write their thoughts on whatever the latest issue is around.” Former DRC fellow Jason Tham echoed that the DRC helped them in “thinking outside of the traditional, just coursework ... and even just writing traditional publications. ... I think [the DRC] is sort of like a third space that is different, but I’m still considering it scholarship and research.”

I’ll return to the idea of a rhetorical “third space” later, but first, I turn to the *collaborative* dimensions of the DRC to begin to sketch its history.

## COLLABORATIVE

As one of the central “commitments ... highlight[ed] throughout this collection,” James Beitler and Sarah Ruffing Robbins acknowledge in their introduction that *collaboration* and attention to community represent vital elements in Anne Gere’s work (7). These qualities characterized her approach to the UM Press invitation, as well. In fact, her first impulse was to consult with members of the computers and writing community to learn about their needs, so that this new digital book series could best serve them. That impulse led us to WIDE-EMU, a new, one-day “unconference” held on the Eastern Michigan University (EMU)

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3 The shifting terminology to name this field of writing is an important area of research in its own right (Lauer).

campus in October of 2011 and co-sponsored by EMU's written communication program and Michigan State University's writing in digital environments (WIDE) program. Anne and I proposed a session on "Envisioning a new digital writing/rhetoric community web space," inviting participants to help us imagine and shape it.

We were joined by a small group of digital rhetoricians with various connections to the field. Key ideas that came out of that conversation named the need for "ebooks that are more than just a pdf," a "place to design [interactive digital projects] in a longer framework," "a medium-form backchannel that operates at a different pace [from an article] but is also relative to scholarship," and "scholarship carnivals [where] you'd have a list of maybe 30 entries that are taking up various crumbs from [an] article and trying to respond and engage" (Gere and Silver). In other words, we learned that there was a need not only for long-form, interactive digital publication venues, but also for a "third space" for short- and medium-form digital writing, a community space to share digital rhetoric research and pedagogy and to carry on conversations in and about the field in a range of genres and forms.

From this discussion begun at WIDE-EMU, things moved quickly. We had enough momentum to set a goal of launching this new book series and community website at C&W 2012, to be held the following May at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. We began the process of building our advisory board, seeking a balance of members with different areas of expertise and different connections to digital rhetoric and digital publication.<sup>4</sup>

Email archives show that by March 1, 2012, we had our board in place and were beginning the process of naming the series and website and collectively wordsmithing a description.<sup>5</sup> With the subject line "Launch!" Anne sent the first collective email to our eight-member board thanking them for serving, identifying our aimed-for May launch date at C&W, and exhorting that "Your first mission, then, is to help find a name." The email thread demonstrates collegial, collective decision-making and an interest in emphasizing both the collaborative nature of digital rhetoric production and the open-ended forms it might take. A day later, on March 2, we had a name: "Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative, it is," I wrote.

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4 The original members of the DRC advisory board were Jonathan Alexander (University of California, Irvine), Cheryl Ball (independent scholar), Kristine L. Blair (Duquesne University), Douglas Eyman (George Mason University), Troy Hicks (Central Michigan University), Derek Mueller (Virginia Tech), Jentery Sayers (University of Victoria), and M. Remi Yergeau (Carleton University). See the current board at <https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/about/board/>.

5 My thanks to Douglas Eyman both for saving these email threads and for sharing them with me following our interview in September 2023.

## COLLABORATIVE 2.0

The next big leap forward for the collaborative was the launch of the DRC graduate fellows program the following year, in June 2013.<sup>6</sup> The fellows design the shape of the DRC website and collaborate to create and curate content for it. This program arose in part from the recognition that more minds and hands were needed to support the DRC website and extend its reach. It had launched in May 2012 with the first DRC blog carnival, “What Does Digital Rhetoric Mean to Me?”—a field-defining conversation to which each of our advisory board members contributed and which traveled across several other blogs and listservs. At that time, we also launched the DRC wiki as part of the original site, the fulfillment of an extensive collaborative effort with developers and designers from the UM Press.<sup>7</sup> But it wasn’t until we invited our first cohort of graduate fellows in August 2013 that the community website really took off.

A further impetus for the fellows program stemmed from Anne’s deep commitment to mentoring and teaching and the thought that this new project could benefit students as well as be benefited by them. The DRC graduate fellows program was in some ways a counterpart to the HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) Scholars program that had begun not long before—but whereas HASTAC Scholars were (and still are) financially sponsored by their universities, the DRC opted for a fellowship model with Sweetland paying each cohort member a stipend.<sup>8</sup> I’ll return in a moment to the creative ways the fellows have molded the website over these twelve years, but first I want to describe the collaborations the program has made possible. As noted, Anne, Simone, and I have been aware of former fellows organizing conference panels together, publishing articles and books together, and becoming colleagues in their first jobs at the same university, so we knew that the fellowship year was reaping dividends beyond the tremendous growth of the DRC website.

I learned a great deal in my discussions with Laura Gonzales and Jason Tham about the quality and shape of some of these continuing connections, namely how the DRC provides a space for graduate students from different programs and institutions to learn how to collaborate and build academic community,

6 Learn about DRC graduate fellows at <https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/about/fellows/>.

7 Jeremy Morse (Director of Publishing Technology and Data Repository Services, Michigan Publishing) and Jonathan McGlone (Digital Product Design Engineer and Accessibility Specialist, Michigan Publishing and Publishing Technology), both of whom continue to work with Michigan Publishing and with the UM Press’ digital publishing platform, Fulcrum, have been especially significant collaborators throughout the DRC’s lifespan.

8 More information about the HASTAC Scholars program is available at <https://hastac.hcommons.org/about/hastac-scholars/>.

such that it becomes “almost second nature” (Tham). They also gained confidence by reaching out to established scholars in the field on behalf of the DRC (by inviting contributions to a blog carnival, say, or editing conference session reviews). As Laura explained, the DRC functions as a “hub that brings people interested in digital rhetoric together from across different institutions. It’s so powerful. But I think the power of it is seen not just in the immediate ... production of the actual blog carnival or the DRC wiki, but in the collaborations that come many years later” (Gonzales).

## RHETORIC 2.0

Turning back to the website as a “third space” for digital and interactive writing, at the WIDE-EMU session, Anne and I had heard the need for opportunities for shorter and faster forms of publication that could engage with conversations in the field without requiring a full peer review and production process. The blog carnivals published in the website’s first year began to meet that need, but the first cohort of DRC graduate fellows took on the charge to imagine other avenues and genres for this writing. Building on their own interests and leading-edge knowledge of digital writing, they engaged the digital rhetoric community in “hacking” and “yacking” about tools and trends, highlighting the developing genre of webtexts, as well as opportunities for teaching and learning around these multimodal, multimedia compositions.<sup>9</sup>

The second cohort of fellows began the practice of publishing an end-of-year reflection, a vivid snapshot of all they and the previous cohort had accomplished:

The 2014-15 academic year ushered in several big changes for the Digital Rhetoric Collaborative! With a major site re-design came an increased focus on ensuring the blog was engaging with the kinds of multiliteracies it heralds. While continuing features like the Webtext-of-the-Month, Wiki Wednesdays, and semester-long Blog Carnivals, new features like DRC Chat on Air, Reflections from the Cloud, and Tool Review Tuesdays were introduced. (Gonzales et al.)

The fellows invited scholars in the field to write short series of posts engaging their current pedagogical and research interests, and they took DRC content to the Twitter-verse, hosting #DRCchats on a range of topics that intersected with current blog carnivals or other publications.

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<sup>9</sup> Find the Hack & Yack series at <https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/conversations/hackandyack/>.

This collaborative work of visioning and re-visioning the DRC website as a space for community interaction and a repository of community knowledge transforms with each new cohort of fellows. Recent cohorts have inaugurated the *DRC Talk Series* of podcasts,<sup>10</sup> including interviews with early career digital rhetoric faculty and “The Sonic Renaissance as an evolving conversation of black rhetorical space” (Neal and Williams), and they’ve boosted the pedagogical offerings on the site with a crowd-sourced syllabus repository and teaching and learning materials collection.<sup>11</sup> As a “third space” of digital writing, the DRC website provides the opportunity for genuine exploration. As Laura Gonzales put it: “I think that idea of approaching big disciplinary conversations as a question and from a position of ‘I want to learn about this, I’m not [yet] trying to say anything about it’ ... was a really important move that I learned through the blog carnival editing [and] that ... I’ve benefited from throughout my career.” The rhetorical situation of the DRC site allows new ideas to be shared rapidly and new knowledge to unfold through conversation, crowd-sourcing, and collaboration.

## DIGITAL 2.0

The WIDE-EMU session also surfaced the need for a scholarly publishing venue that could support long-form, interactive, born-digital projects. With our DRC advisory board, we developed a series description that outlined the areas we hoped to address: “born-digital as well as digitally enhanced submissions—in the form of collections and monographs of varying lengths and genres—that engage with digital rhetoric’s histories and futures; its border-fields and trans-disciplines; its ethics and aesthetics; its materialities, networks, praxes and pedagogies” (“Mission”). Among these aims, the complexity of navigating the border between “born-digital” and “digitally enhanced”—between *how digital is digital enough*, on one hand, and *how digital is too digital*, on the other—has persisted throughout our publication history. Our experience tracks the broader history of academic digital publication as it has encountered constraints posed both by the university tenure and promotion process and by the development, cost, and labor demands of digital production.

Our first three DRC series books actively negotiated these issues. Jim Ridolfo’s *Digital Samaritans: Rhetorical Delivery and Engagement in the Digital Humanities* appeared in 2015 as a physical book with digitally enhanced content

10 Find the podcasts at <https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/category/conversations/drc-talk-series/>.

11 Find the syllabus repository at [https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/teaching-materials/syllabus\\_repository/](https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/teaching-materials/syllabus_repository/) and the teaching and learning materials collection at <https://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/teaching-materials/teaching-learning-materials-collection/>.



that was hosted on the Michigan Digital Library eXtension Service (DLXS) and referenced with printed urls appearing both in the main text and in image captions. The hope was that readers would be curious enough about that content (including videos, maps, and an interactive Samaritan keyboard) to type the urls into their browsers to experience it.<sup>12</sup> This book offered a kind of proof of concept of an early aim of the UM Press to allow authors “a way of presenting research data alongside their books,” as well as significant, innovative supplementary digital materials (Watkinson et al.).

In October of 2016, Michigan Publishing—home of the University of Michigan Press, Michigan Publishing Services, and the UM research repository Deep Blue—announced the “beta launch” of its next-generation digital publishing platform, Fulcrum (University of Michigan Press). At that time, two new DRC books were in production: *Making Space: Writing Instruction, Infrastructure, and Multiliteracies*, edited by James P. Purdy and Danielle Nicole DeVoss, and *Rhizcomics: Rhetoric, Technology, and New Media Composition* by Jason Helms. These projects were both proposed as born-digital webtexts whose interactive designs are an integral part of their arguments. Addressing some of the central affordances and constraints of digital publishing, Fulcrum promises its readers, authors, and publishers “flexibility,” “durability,” “discoverability,” and “accessibility” (“About”). But these highly important values were in tension with an equally important value of digital composition, that “form and content should be imbricated,” as Helms puts it in the Rationale section of “Making *Rhizcomics*.” He names this tension as it manifested during the editing of *Rhizcomics*, writing in the Technical Edits section, “there were two major criteria pulling in opposite directions: sustainability and functionality. . . . The press wanted something they could maintain in perpetuity. I wanted something that was fully functional now, even if that meant it might deteriorate over time.”

Testing the press’ more ambitious aim to “provide the infrastructure to enable long form presentations of digital scholarship” (Watkinson et al.), *Rhizcomics* and *Making Space* reached different outcomes. For the latter, the press and the volume’s editors worked collaboratively to find a novel solution: *Making Space* was “published in two digital formats: one housed on the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative (DRC) website in its original webtext design and the other housed as an enhanced pdf for the DRC book series with the University of Michigan Press” (Purdy and DeVoss, “Preface”). As Purdy and DeVoss explain, this outcome constitutes a “rhetorical and strategic” choice that highlights a genuine innovation of digital publication: “Rather than view the project as needing to decide between

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12 More information about DLXS is at <http://www.dlxs.org/about/aboutdlxs.html>. *Digital Samaritans* is now hosted by the UM Press on the Fulcrum publishing platform where the urls are hyperlinked.



either one format or the other ... we opted for a 'both and' approach. ... A digital publication need not be seen as singular or bounded or exist in only one 'location.'" It can "preserve the design intended by the collection's authors ... [and] be preserved and maintained long term in a more stable space." Ultimately, *Rhizcomics* took a different path: following detailed consultation between the author and the editors and developers at the press, it was published solely as a webtext, with its complex interactivity and design unfurling as envisioned.

A chapter devoted to Anne Gere's impact on sites of digital writing would not be complete without a mention of the digitally enhanced book she edited for the DRC series, *Developing Writers in Higher Education: A Longitudinal Study*. As with so many other moments in DRC development, this book came about through collaboration and community. In fact, it specifically came about through grant funding from UM's Humanities Collaboratory, within a project titled "The Book Unbound: Enhancing Multilayered Digital Publications through Collaboration" devoted "to collaboratively study and improve the practice of digital publication in the humanities" (Watkinson). This grant project, which ran from 2017–2019, was the brainchild of the University of Michigan Press director, Charles Watkinson, and highlights the press' partnership with the DRC not only to bring ground-breaking digital rhetoric scholarship to the public, but also to co-investigate its possibilities.

The grant brought together a large, interdisciplinary team: UM faculty members, graduate students, and undergraduate students from Sweetland; classical studies; film, television, and media; and the school of information; as well as staff from the UM library and press, with Anne Gere and Nicola Terrenato (classical studies) acting as co-PIs. The project culminated in three multilayer publications on the Fulcrum platform that, as Anne describes it, offer "an opportunity to rethink the methods and meanings of publication" (qtd. in Watkinson). Each layer "address[es] multiple audiences by providing varying digitized experiences" ("Book Unbound"). *Developing Writers* comprises a more traditional book layer (published in both paper and ebook forms) directed at researchers and teachers in writing studies, a data layer directed toward future research that provides access to all of the qualitative and quantitative materials gathered for the study, and a public-facing website layer that aims to translate the concepts behind the research for a general audience. To date, *Developing Writers* remains one of the highest grossing and most viewed publications in the DRC series.

## SWEETLAND 2.0

Scanning the DRC book series list, advisory board member Douglas Eyman noted during our interview that "if you look at the ... focus of each one of these

texts ... you can almost trace where the interests in digital rhetoric are through the books themselves.” He echoed and amplified the digital metaphor Gonzales used for professional collaboration, describing the DRC as “a network hub in the field” facilitating “connections across spaces that aren’t happening” elsewhere. Picking up on Doug’s words, we can follow the metaphorical trail left by Anne’s innovative work in Sweetland and with the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative—work that is central to “her view of scholarship as a communal and ongoing process,” as Beitler and Robbins put it in their introduction to this collection (5). *Collaborations, networks, braids*—the Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative weaves and traces strands of connection across multiple sites of digital writing and community, pulling on ideas, stretching fields of research and inquiry, coming together over time and space in nodes, hubs, and relationships. The reach of the relationships rooted in DRC collaborations and the futures of the DRC’s role in the ever-growing story of digital publishing remain to be traced and gathered in further articles, chapters, and books—whether born-digital or digitally enhanced. In the meantime, the collaborative community Anne Gere began continues to feed the field of digital rhetoric—the DRC series has new books under review and in production and the DRC graduate fellows are adding new content to the website. Follow the links and join in!

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