

Transcript

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Derek Bruff: [00:06] Welcome to “Leading Lines,” a podcast from Vanderbilt University. I’m your host, Derek Bruff, director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching. In this podcast we explore creative, intentional and effective uses of technology to enhance student learning, uses that point the way to the future of educational technology in college and university settings.

[00:25] In this episode, we feature an interview with Jeff Rice, inaugural chair of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. That’s W-R-D, or WRD, as they refer to the department.

[00:37] Rice also holds the Martha B. Reynolds Chair in Writing, Rhetoric and Digital Studies, and is the author of multiple books and essays including his most recent book *Craft Obsession: The Social Rhetorics of Beer*.

[00:49] Rice recently sat down with my colleague John Sloop, Vanderbilt’s Associate Provost for Digital Learning and a professor of communications, at the Rhetoric Society of America conference in Atlanta, where the two discussed the mission of digital studies, the role of open online education and the relationship between craft beer and digital communication.

[01:06] [music]

John Sloop: [01:11] I’m John Sloop. I’m sitting here with Jeff Rice, the Chair of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. He’s also the author of *Craft Obsession: The Social Rhetorics of Beer*, also *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media* and *Digital Detroit: Rhetoric and Space in the Age of the Network*.

[01:30] One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you, Jeff, was, as chair of your department, I wanted to talk to you a little about this department trying to do something with digital studies. In my experience, I know these departments are starting to emerge, but you don't see them everywhere.

[01:46] I was hoping you could tell us a little bit about the history of your department, how it emerged, things like that, how you differ from other programs.

Jeff Rice: [01:53] The history of what we call WRD, Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies, does precede me in the sense that there was an internal report done from an outside, external review before I ever got to Kentucky, at the time.

[02:10] That came to the conclusion that writing should be more emphasized at the University of Kentucky and that it was possible, at that point, that maybe there should be a writing department or something separate from the English department.

[02:22] At the time, there were two individuals in the department who were part of that study, who were writing folks. They began a process of recruitment. They brought in a director of writing.

[02:34] She, in turn, started to recruit faculty to come. The dean gave her a number of lines. That led, in the beginning, to a division within the department of English called WRD.

[02:47] My wife, Jenny Rice, and I were part of that recruitment process along with Vershawn Young and Adam Banks and I believe Jan Fernheimer was hired though through a search. We all joined the division. We were hired into the English department at the time as English professors, but we operated independently as quasi units.

[03:05] We had our own budget. We had our own minds. We couldn't hire without English's approval because anybody hired at that time would have been an English faculty member, but other than TMP, we really didn't do anything with the English department.

[03:17] Meanwhile, she was putting forth, as director of this division, the paperwork for us to become a department with the dean's approval and provost's approval, went to work its way through the senate, etc. Finally, two years ago, we became a department and split entirely from the English department.

[03:35] The main reason, obviously, for having a...Some of it's political in the sense for a long time people who work in rhetoric and composition have felt marginalized as English professors. I had already been in three other English departments before I came to UK. I was at the University of Missouri when we were recruited.

[03:54] That feeling of marginalization, despite having very good job placement for graduate students, despite having good placement for undergraduate students, despite having often extremely strong publication records, rhetoric and composition still often feels that it's marginalized in English because it doesn't study literature.

[04:11] The other problem often is that we don't see students multiple times because there may only be a handful of courses that we'll teach, so a student may come into our course once and that's it. Whereas the idea of having our own department would be we could see students many times. In fact, that they would major in writing. We could work with them more closely.

[04:31] This was what was really intriguing to me, that they'll be more involved in undergraduate education and they come to Kentucky to do this. The department is going to its third year. We're building our major. We have a minor both in writing, rhetoric and digital studies. We also have a minor in professional and technical writing.

[04:51] We have a number of robust courses in a variety of areas of writing studies and everything from writing in the social sciences, science writing, the essay, social media courses, but we also have courses on the digital side in digital composing, multimedia, documentary making.

[05:09] Then of course, on the rhetoric side, we have history of rhetoric, rhetorical traditions and we even now have what I'd call a [inaudible] course. We have a number of courses for students to take and some special topics, etc. The idea is that students would professionalize in the subject of writing as they would in any other subject.

John: [05:30] I want to interrupt here for a second. While I understand everything you're saying, the part of the title that stands out, when I first saw the department, is the digital studies part.

[05:41] Not that I know a lot of departments that are just departments of writing, but digital

studies seems the sexy, contemporary part of this title.

[05:50] When you've talked, and when I've looked at your Web page, there's discussion of writing. I didn't count the words, but maybe more than the word digital, but digital is a hook for an outsider.

[06:05] Why digital and how much of an emphasis is that? Do you see much of a distinction between digital writing and what we think of as writing?

Jeff: [06:14] I didn't name the department, but I can understand the reason for putting writing, rhetoric and the digital together because of the tradition I came out of, graduate school at the University of Florida where writing studies and digital studies, they're not separate.

[06:27] If you think about it for a second, all the writing we do today, what is not digital? What is not done using any form of technology, whether you're using word processing or you're making infographics or you're creating video or you're working in social media, you are constantly in the digital.

[06:46] The only other exception would be, obviously, using a piece of paper, which people do, but not often in a professional or academic sense.

[06:54] This is the tradition I came out of, so it was natural for me to come to a department that looked at all writing as digital and not looking at the distinction that, "OK, well first you take your writing courses over here, and then you take your digital courses over here."

[07:05] Instead, all courses will involve the digital. We're not a service department, but obviously, we offer the first year writing sequence, which all students have to take.

[07:15] Even that has a strong digital component, which you can see in the first year students doing podcasts, making videos, having blogs, working in wikis, depending on the course, doing audio ethnographies, doing visual ethnographies, making visual arguments, creating infographics.

[07:36] Because what form of expression today is not digital? We have that throughout all of our curriculum. We'll have certain courses, one's called digital composing, one's called

multimedia, that would emphasize the digital a little bit more, but the fact is you could take any course with us and it's very likely that you are going to do a presentation using either video, or at the very least, the most basic PowerPoint.

[08:03] That might not even be a good description of what you're going to do in a presentation situation, or you might be asked to create a website or you may be asked to create a podcast. It really depends on...I've used online archiving tools for classes, I've used weblogs for classes, I've used video for classes.

[08:19] There's really no differentiation today between composing in general and composing in terms of the digital. Only the fact that a lot of the rhetorical gestures and moves you'll make, there may be some additional things you're going to learn when you're working in digital media.

John: [08:35] I agree with you totally, but there would be a way of teaching students how to write for a podcast or how to write for blogs without teaching them the tools — how to edit on Audacity, for example, or something like that. Do you teach them the tools as well, is that part of what you do?

Jeff: [08:53] Here's a good differentiation between us and the School of Communication at UK, which offers courses in strategic communication, and media arts and studies, I believe, is the other degree they offer.

[09:07] When we have students who come over and work with us we see the difference might be that what we might teach you, for example, some basic skills of using Photoshop or iMovie or Audacity, our purpose is not that you become an expert in the tool, but that you learn, for example, about organizational skills, you learn about editing, you learn about reaching an audience.

[09:31] Let's say you're working in video or in the visual, you learn about juxtaposition as a rhetorical gesture. When I put unlike things together, can I create a certain effect for the audience?

[09:40] Whereas if you are on the other side in comm, not to belittle the comm side, but that is not really part of the curriculum. It is more about becoming very adept at Photoshop.

[09:51] We're assuming some basic stuff. We're not going to make you the best videographer, but we're going to show you some basic skills in video editing and video production so that you can...but the rhetorical side of things is more what we're going to emphasize, in terms of research, organization, audience understanding, persuasion in the digital environment.

[10:13] There's a bit of a difference, but that's why we try very much, though, to work with the communication folks, so that students on their side might minor over on our side and students on our side might minor on their side, so that they get both sides of the equation.

John: [10:26] I was going to ask, how often does that happen, how many students do a bit of both?

Jeff: [10:30] From any strategic communication, we're finding more and more...we're only in our second year, but we're finding more and more students who are interested in taking courses with us and minoring with us.

[10:39] There are some political issues that sometimes prevent some of the faculty on that side from the recommendation, but we also have some colleagues over there who understand this is beneficial to both sides for students to minor across and take courses across the colleges.

[10:53] We encourage it on our side. Any student on our side who wants to take a course in communication, we're very enthusiastic.

[10:58] We see some of their students come over and they'll say, "Look, I learned how to work in Adobe After Effects over there pretty well, but I didn't learn audience and I didn't learn organization and I didn't learn specific rhetorical strategies, like appropriation or how to aggregate information or [inaudible]. I'm getting that over here."

[11:16] That's in the end what's best, is that they're getting both sides. If they want to go on to work in mass media they'll have, hopefully, an edge on students who didn't study rhetoric or writing.

John: [11:31] So far, if your dean or president was looking at your department, would they be happy with the direction it's going, do you think, or are you having to make some adjustments as you go along?

Jeff: [11:41] No, I think so. I think we've done really well in the first couple of years. We started from nothing because when a student comes to any university, but let's just say the University of Kentucky, it's very likely, even if they don't know what's being taught in sociology or psychology or anthropology, they've heard of those subjects.

[11:59] They know there's something called "anthropology," but what student has ever heard of something called, "writing, rhetoric and digital studies." You've never heard of it, it didn't exist.

[12:09] We've had to spend a lot of time selling and using our own understanding of persuasion and argumentation to convince students, "Look, here's something you might want to minor in. Here's something you might want to major in."

[12:22] We have a number of double majors because students are thinking, "Well, this might help me get a job better," than just being an English major or just being a psychology major or just being this major.

[12:33] I would say yes, they'd be pleased because we've gone from zero to...last year, we had 24 majors in our second year. If the number of students who are declared as freshmen come this fall, as we're hoping they will, we'll be at 40-something majors in the fall.

[12:51] My anticipation is after four or five years we'll be 100 and something majors. I think that would be great. In terms of our scholarly production and all that, that was already set, we have nationally known faculty in our department. There's no problem on the sense of the kind of scholarship we're producing.

[13:07] In terms of a department that generates revenue, it turns out we're one of the leaders in the college, very quickly generating a lot of revenue because we've quickly taken a stance that we want to be a healthy department.

[13:20] We want to do what's right for the students in terms of making things cost-effective for them, while at the same time opening up revenue streams for us, for example, textbook production would be that.

[13:28] We don't work with any major textbook publishers, we produce our own textbook. It only costs the students \$40, we keep \$30 of it, things of that sort. We've also taken up the

entrepreneur spirit of the university, which is often encouraged today.

[13:42] We're going to see, I think, very quickly, students...we're already placing students in internships in our second year, which we're very happy about.

John: [13:50] Tell me a little bit about that, what I'm interested in hearing is, if you're students are...if I was an undergraduate, what would attract me would be, again, I don't want to keep harping back to this, but the digital studies part, is that what's...?

Jeff: [14:02] It can. It's part of it, but also there are students who've traditionally majored in other things, thinking, 'I want to write,' or "I wanna be involved in Web development," "I wanna be involved in content management," "I wanna be involved in the production of certain materials for certain industries."

[14:20] Every industry has writing involved. I once wrote in the diamond and jewelry industry. For example, in Kentucky there's a horse industry. Keeneland is one of the big tracks in the country.

[14:29] The odds of you...if you're an equine, going to work in veterinarian medicine in terms of the actual care of horses are probably small, there're not a lot of opportunities, but working in the communicative aspect of the horse industry, in terms of producing promotional videos, in-house documentation, publications for the industry, extremely high.

[14:48] Still a lot of opportunity. Web development. What we're offering is an opportunity to learn skills that will get students jobs in those areas. I'm just using the horse industry as one example.

[14:59] Biology students, for example, one of our pitches to the biology...biology's one of the biggest majors in the college, but we know that all these students who are majoring in biology, maybe 10 percent are going to med school at the most. Most of them are not going to be doctors.

[15:14] But, what if I'm good at science enough that I understand science, I'm not good enough to be a doctor, but I want to work in the health industry. There's a great deal of work to be done in creating the documentation, information, app development, content management, working for the pharmaceutical companies producing the literature.

[15:33] All kinds of opportunities if you're a good communicator in the print and in the digital. This is how we pitch ourselves to students. Engineering students who need persuasion skills and argumentative skills. It's not just that you design something, you have to convince both the folks you work with, "This is a good product I'm creating."

[15:54] You have to convince your investors this something that's worth pursuing. Eventually, the public will have to be convinced. I have a lot of pitches I use, a lot of examples, historical examples about why this is important. You have engineering students going, 'You know what, maybe I do want to minor in this after all.'

[16:11] I think it's attractive from a number of perspectives. One is, without belittling the other folks in the humanities or even English where I came from, I never really heard in four other English departments the issue of job placement.

[16:23] That doesn't mean we're vocational, it just means in addition to the lifelong learning goals that we all have in humanities, we are very, very concerned with job placement. We can't guarantee you, but we want to help put you in situations in which you're employable because you have the edge.

[16:40] You have the communicative skills in writing that every single survey that we see produced keeps claiming. Everyone keeps claiming, "We want students to be better writers." We can teach the content, but we want them to be better communicators in writing and the use of digital communication. That's what we're offering. Those skills that, supposedly, everybody wants.

John: [17:01] We're going to see...I know there are other departments that you have pointed, but in some ways you're doing an interesting experiment. What I see at a lot of places, including in Vanderbilt, there are always outlets for you to tell parents or tell the students, "Yes, she should major in this and you can also pick up a minor in managerial studies," etc.

[17:22] You're trying to put the practical together with that, but in one department, you're getting both of those in one place, the way you guys are doing it. It's going to be an interesting experiment to see how that works out.

Jeff: [17:32] We've seen this one...I teach a social media class, which is one of our large classes. I'm a marketing major. I'm learning all the nuts and bolts that marketing does that I

don't personally know what it is, but one thing I'm not learning is argumentation and persuasion, which is at the heart of marketing.

[17:47] I'm not learning how to use visual tools for marketing. I'm not learning how to make up infographics and do the research to create a productive infographic. I understand how to reach the...I can do the audience analysis in marketing, maybe, but I don't understand what I do with that information afterwards in terms of being persuasive.

[18:03] Minor with us. We're not telling anybody not to major in something. We're not telling anybody that the other majors are inferior to us. My argument is never that because it's not true. This is something additional that we think will help you be a better lifelong learner and a better student, but also, we believe, more employable.

[18:21] We know from just studying the way this works, that engineers can increase their marketability for jobs when they have better written communication skills. They just do.

[18:35] That gives you the edge on the other candidate. We're not the only writing department, obviously. Texas, Syracuse, very, very good writing departments. Minnesota has one too.

[18:48] There are others across the country and this is the movement of writing splitting from English, and English might want to really think about...They are thinking about what they're doing, taking it more seriously as writing departments break off and have success.

John: [19:04] It really is an interesting moment. I'm coming from rhetoric department's communication, which have also been seen as step-children at times. It's an interesting moment where if we do this right, and we educate and make how we're educating important for job placement, it's really an interesting mix right now.

[19:29] I want to move on to a couple of other questions. Talk a little bit to me about the faculty you're hiring and where your department as a whole, where do you see it going, how you're going to grow as both a research department, which is part of your mission.

Jeff: [19:42] The biggest concern when people form writing departments, often, is that they're going to be delegated to service, meaning they will only teach first year writing, maybe some technical writing and maybe some business writing. That is not our mission.

[19:55] The dean has made it very clear that it was never supposed to be our mission. We don't feel it's our mission. We do offer those courses obviously, but in addition we feel we're serving intellectually the university by offering more advanced courses in writing and digital communication.

[20:10] We've just gone through our first hiring since I took over after a couple departures. We hired an individual from South Florida who's very good in environmental communication and technical writing.

[20:23] We see this as a great area for us, particularly in our ability to partner with environmental studies at University of Kentucky, which is very important, and continue to build a science writing area which we still think technical and professional writing is extremely important to what we do.

[20:39] Then we've also hired someone else from the University of Wisconsin who specializes in citizenship and studying, particularly in China and in Hong Kong, the rhetoric of citizenship and identity politics and affect, which we think is important also for the theoretical parts of our department.

[21:00] We do rhetorical theory as well, obviously, and this will be an additional rhetorical theorist for us in a particularly interesting area. Not to say that she will only work in issues of China, but having another person who can speak to issues that are global is important to us as well.

[21:18] We have people who specialize, obviously, in rhetorical theory, in Jewish studies, in digital media, in food studies and literacy studies. We see the department as varied with a lot of specialties, just like any department.

John: [21:35] I'm going to move into a different area here. I know you personally and I know some of your commentary, your offhand commentary about online education. I'm wondering if you can give us some of your thoughts here about...I'm going to open this up broadly, so feel free to riff on it, you're thoughts on...

[21:53] We're clearly, in some sense, we're in that moment of disillusionment with MOOCs. There was the big talk a couple of years ago, revolutionary...There are still all sorts of promise there, in my thinking, but it's changed.

[22:07] What are your thoughts on where MOOCs might go or online education in general, whatever you want to take of that? That means, as you know, I'm not teaching you anything here, that means multiple things to multiple people. Flipped classrooms, yada, yada, yada. If I was to ask you just like this, what are your broad thoughts on where we're going?

Jeff: [22:28] The four places I've been at, three were Research I universities. Research I universities historically have not embraced online education the way smaller colleges have, and that's been detrimental to the universities from a practical standpoint because they've lost out on a lot of revenue, frankly.

[22:43] I know when we were in Missouri, Missouri would look across the street at Columbia College and be like, "I don't get it. That tiny little school is generating so much money in online education and we're not."

[22:53] Some of it has just historically been hostility and the preference for face-to-face over the online. Some of it is just the real lack of understanding of what online education might offer. In our department we offer a few courses online, but they're just service courses in the summer or mid-semester for students who need to pick up a course.

[23:12] We still don't see UK as being a leader in this regard, either, and smaller schools are often the leaders. Even when we're saying, "We need more revenue, we need more revenue."

[23:19] The MOOC discussion obviously comes out of that and the idea that we're going to figure out...we can reach a 1,000 students or 30,000 students at once, but they haven't figured out how to monetize it since only 10 percent of the students historically complete the course, if even.

[23:33] That means a lot of students are just hanging out, which also meant that the early attraction to MOOCs was actually not for students that are currently studying for degrees, but people who just want to take a course to learn about an idea, or just want to hang out for a little bit, or even people like myself who are just curious of what's going on.

[23:51] If I signed up for a MOOC, it was never to do the course, it was just to try to understand how does it work.

[23:58] Whether MOOCs are good or not, I think it was always the mistake in terms of how

we looked at it and like anything in education, we treat new ideas in a hyperbolic manner which is either it's, "Oh, my gosh, this is the greatest thing in the world. This is going to solve all our problems."

[24:12] Or you have the flip at the time which was, "Oh, this the end of liberal education and the humanities, and this is neo-liberal, and blah, blah, blah." It turns out it was neither and there was nothing really incredible about MOOCs except for the fact that they were...those that were successful were reaching audiences that otherwise couldn't obtain some form of American education.

[24:34] You have a lot of Chinese and Indians and Russians taking some of these courses to learn about something that was going on in our system that couldn't come to America and take a course.

[24:44] There's still great potential with online education in terms of the large scale part, which the MOOC offers in terms of reaching, for example, populations in America, so Kentucky, that might be reaching out to eastern Kentucky where folks often don't go to college.

[24:59] Or there might be other opportunities to shift the classroom to online and face-to-face, or just online, but for whatever reason we're often really hostile. We just think immediately, "This is terrible and this is going to ruin everything we're currently doing," without just spending some time thinking about how can we do it.

[25:13] The other problem is that we outsource everything. Almost every university involved in it has a department of computer science. Some department interested in pedagogy, whether it's writing or education or English or whatever, and yet all of these tools are outsourced, they become incredibly expensive.

[25:30] Coursera, or whoever, they see that opportunity because they see that universities are never going to produce a large scale operation, but what Coursera was offering, just like it's predecessors at the smaller little Blackboard and before Blackboard, WebCT, basically just shells that don't do much more than we could have created on our own for exchanging files, message board, email.

[25:52] There's nothing particularly amazing about Coursera. It doesn't even host the videos

that I use for the lectures. You just embed YouTube videos. Anybody can create a shell in which you embed a YouTube video for a lecture. There's still great potential. They just haven't...

John: [26:08] But they are able to offer marketing, for example, that you can offer...

Jeff: [26:11] But we have a marketing department in the...We have a whole group of people studying marketing.

John: [26:14] I don't disagree with you there, I'm just pointing out that it's harder to reach multiple students in India.

Jeff: [26:20] They were basing it on brand, of course. Obviously Harvard and Duke and John Hopkins and Stanford have a better brand than the University of Kentucky, but Vandy has a good brand already, so you already have a good brand.

[26:32] We do have a brand because...on the other hand, it's really weird, it's like any other university, probably Vandy as well, we get a lot of foreign international students because international students pay a lot of money to come, so it's really important to a university to recruit international students who are not on any kind of scholarship.

[26:46] You can still do something similar online, even if you offered a huge discount, and still make it profitable. The potential is there, we just haven't figured it out for all kinds... sometimes for political reasons. UK, one...

[27:02] We're trying to do this in my department, too, we're trying to move into the online in our department very quickly in a sense of offering first a certificate and we have specific audiences in mind for this certificate.

[27:14] We know these audiences will pay to do this certificate because of the professions they're in, and then we've also talked to the science folks about an online MA in science writing for people already in the science industry. Both, if successful, could be extremely profitable, but the problem, I don't know about Vandy, but the problem with UK is bureaucracy.

[27:32] It takes forever to get anything approved and so long...and then the other question,

so someone wants to get something approved, the other question, again, I don't know how it is at Vanderbilt, but at Kentucky we're told all the time, "You should do this, you should do this," there'll be profit sharing.

[27:47] Unlike any other entrepreneur scheme we can think of, it's never actually clear what the profit sharing is going to be. Do we get 50 percent of the department? Do we get 30 percent? Do we get 20 percent?

[27:58] Our colleagues in geography have right off the bat a successful online MA that's doing really well They haven't seen a dime from it even though the tuitions' been paid and they still don't know what are they going to see in their own department from it.

[28:10] There's not a lot of incentive if you're in a department to do all this work with no seed money from the university sometimes, or very little, almost no support, we're talking about marketing, and then you're not even told what is your share going to be from your department.

[28:23] We have the intellectual ability to do all of this and do it well. We don't have the infrastructural ability because we have so much bureaucracy and not enough open communication about, "OK, let's be partners."

[28:37] The university, the college and the department, let's be partners and figure out what is fair and how the seed money works and how the sharing of the profits work afterwards, and we'll find better success in online education. Rather than let's just hire someone for \$3,000 to teach an online course, let's do it a better way.

[28:53] Not a lot of willingness yet, but the potential is still there. I'm not worried about MOOCs destroying anything. They're not going to destroy anything at all. They're not an evil thing. Nothing is evil in itself, it's that we're going with the pedagogical innovations that are put in front us.

John: [29:08] I'm just going to ask you two more questions. First one, what is your favorite non-digital education technology?

Jeff: [29:20] My favorite non-digital education technology might be a "technology," so I'll put that in spare quotes, that students absolutely, positively hate. I've never seen any group

of students in a classroom like this. It's called group work.

[29:38] If group work is a kind of technology, the collaborative atmosphere of sharing, as well as frustration, group work is still the best...the wisdom of crowds, the hive mind, I still think is the best way for learning in the classroom that students, in my experience, hate working in groups no matter what.

[30:05] You think of a technology, the fact that you're putting three or four smart people together, not that there'll be some smarter, they came to the university, they got accepted to the university, they're smart, there's no doubt about it.

[30:14] But the idea that now you have to work with other individuals, you have to compromise, you have to be responsible, you have to be mature, you have to share opinions, you have to learn from each other, that's an important "technology."

John: [30:23] That's hard when you've seen grades as competitive...

Jeff: [30:26] It's hard for us, at our level, to do it, I understand too. It's hard for professors to do it. It's extremely difficult and I explain it all the time. It's not going to be easy. I don't even like working in groups sometimes, but I think it's incredibly important.

[30:39] If that's a technology, the working as a group, that is still what I try to teach over and over again. One of the most essential skills you'll learn is working with other people. Did that make sense?

John: [30:49] Yeah, it makes perfect sense. I don't want to talk to you without giving you an opportunity, both because I want to give you an opportunity to talk about it and also because I'm interested. Talking about your most recent book coming out, *Craft Obsession: The Social Rhetorics of Beer*, I know you've had an interest in beer.

[31:04] You talk about beer through social media, etc. Can you talk a little bit about what you see the book doing? In your position as chair of this department, does this tie back into digital studies? How does this tie back into digital studies?

Jeff: [31:18] Yes. Basically, this book comes out of my interest in social media, in social media rhetorics, which I would call things like the anecdote, the telling of a personal story online or

saying something personal online. Repetition, what Tony Sampson calls the “contagion.” Aggregation, the assemblage of a lot of different things in a space. Sharing, which could be information or images, etc.

[31:46] This book takes those concepts, what I call “social media rhetorics,” and explores them through the lens of craft beer. Now you say, “Why craft beer?” It could be anything, I guess. The basic reason, of course, is that craft beer functions by way of social media.

[32:02] Basically, you have small breweries who don’t have operating budgets and marketing budgets, who are dependent on telling their story. They’re creating their brand and creating connections and sharing with an audience that they otherwise can’t reach. That’s one of the main reasons.

[32:17] The other reason, obviously, is because this group of folks who congregate in social media, who are taking pictures of what they’re drinking and sharing them, who are on the message boards in the applications and Untappd and RateBeer and BeerAdvocate and Twitter and Instagram and Facebook, there’s so many beer groups on Facebook, they’re obsessed. They’re obsessed with this product.

[32:38] The other reason, of course, is because I am part of that group. I’m obsessed as well. I am a craft beer drinker. All my books get a little more personal each time. What I wanted to do was also talk about not just...The object of study is not just craft beer. The object of study is not just social media. It’s also me.

[32:54] And you know, Ong famously documents how Peter Ramus divorced the personal from writing by creating the outline. There have been a number of theorists over the years who try to bring the personal back into the object of study.

[33:08] This is not to be expressive. This is not to be navel-gazing, but understand we’re often implicated, if not always, in the subjects we study.

[33:16] There’s a reason why you study. There’s an exigence for what you’re studying. Sometimes it’s because I’m part of this, too. I’m interested in this. This sparks me. This motivates me. This enralls me or disgusts me or whatever the case may be. I’m also part of the study as I go through and try to think about how social media works rhetorically.

[33:31] I hope this book will appeal to academics who are interested in studying the rhetoric of social media, just the way I think my other books have done, studying the rhetoric of networks or rhetoric of writing.

[33:42] In other two books...it's divided very similarly into sections that are the rhetorical gestures and strategies, but that they would also be interested from the craft beer side, to think in a more complex manner about how this particular movement...

[33:58] It's part of the larger movement of artisanal foods, obviously. It's taken over the country and other parts of the world in the last 20 years, how it works rhetorically. It will be a great, great book.

[34:11] It's digital because it's the study of social media. It's one thing to study social media and say, "Facebook is invading our privacy," or something very commonplace, but it's another thing to think about, not from a judgmental point of view, but how does social media work rhetorically.

[34:28] How does repetition work? Just a brief example, one thing that happens often in craft beer is people tell their first time of having a beer. There are so many brewers and so many drinkers who write, whether it's in a memoir or a book about history of craft beer, or an article, "The first time I had a beer."

[34:48] It's usually, "I was in the yard. It was hot. I was a kid. I was mowing the lawn with my dad, or doing yard work with my dad, and he gave me a lager -- a cold lager." It's almost everybody's first story. It's my first story. I was in the yard working with my dad. He gave me a Heineken.

[35:05] What we call that is contagion. It's a repetition. Repetition creates meaning. We think we're the originator of a story. Instead, we repeat it. The other repeated narrative ideal found early in the book is the craft beer narrative of revolution. This is a revolution. A revolution is a repeated narrative.

[35:21] Lots of things are repeated narratives, if we think about it. This stands for the way repetition works online, that we repeat things online often without thinking about the fact that I'm just borrowing a previous expression and making it my own, without realizing I'm a...It means I'm a part of a larger conversation, actually.

[35:36] I do this kind of work with other subject matters as well, besides beer. For example, "I am." If you think about "I am" for a second -- just to get off tangent for a second -- I am the 99 percent. That was a tangent. That was a statement, meaning I'm not the one percent that's controlling the country. I'm part of the majority.

[35:55] Also, "Je suis Charlie," after the Charlie Hebdo massacres. "Je suis Juif," after the massacre at the kosher grocery store right after that. "I'm a Liberian" during the Ebola crisis. "I am Harvard," Harvard students who are African American protesting the idea that they don't belong there. I am — a 1968 garbage worker strike — "I am a man."

[36:16] There's a long history of "I ams", meaning it's a repetition. It's a contagion. In social media, that picks up on all these current "I ams." The same thing for craft beer, you have this kind of repetitions, what I called "contagions."

[36:27] This is a social media rhetoric. When you understand that and when you understand that you're part of a larger conversation, you understand persuasion online in a very different manner because you understand there's a larger audience at stake than just the statement itself.

[36:39] That's just a brief example of why this is important for digital studies, whether or not you're interested in craft beer. If you're interested in craft beer, it's a plus.

[36:45] [laughter]

John: [36:47] All right. I'm going to draw this to a close. Thank you for being with us here today.

Jeff: [36:52] Thank you.

John: [36:53] I look forward to reading the book. Actually, I have read the book, but I'm looking forward to others reading the book. All right. Thank you, Jeff.

Jeff: [36:58] Thank you, John.

[36:52] [music]

Derek: [37:01] That was Jeff Rice, professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. You can read more about Rice and his department by following the links in the show notes.

[37:11] As I reflect on that interview, I'm reminded of a quandary I found myself in a few years ago. I was teaching a first year writing seminar at Vanderbilt and I was interested in having my students create some form of digital product as part of the course, something more visual than the typical 10-page research paper.

[37:27] I held off, however, feeling bound by the requirements for writing seminars set by the school regarding the number of pages students had to write in one of these courses. It was a writing seminar, after all. Students needed to write.

[37:39] I think I created some interesting and authentic writing assignments for the course, but I didn't have students engaged in the kind of digital multimedia work I wanted. "What form of expression is not digital?" That's something Jeff Rice said in his interview and it reflects the philosophy of his department about the nature of communication today.

[37:56] I'm encouraged by that and I think the next time I teach my writing seminar, I won't take those page count requirements quite so seriously. My experience with "Leading Lines" has me thinking about student-produced podcasts, for instance.

[38:09] How do you see writing in digital media fitting in the undergraduate curriculum today? Should we maintain traditional writing requirements or should these be expanded to more general digital communications requirements?

[38:20] What might a digital across-the-curriculum movement look like? What would it take to make it work? Let us know what you think at our website, leadinglinespod.com, or on Twitter, where our handle is @LeadingLinesPod.

[38:33] You've been listening to Leading Lines, a podcast on educational technology from Vanderbilt University. The podcast is produced by the Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications, and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[38:45] [music]

[38:46] Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.