Tuesday, June 23, 2015

Writing and Rhetoric professor wins best dissertation award

Crystal VanKooten, Ph.D., an assistant professor of **Writing and Rhetoric**, recently received the 2014 Hugh Burns Best Dissertation Award from the journal "Computers and Composition." Her dissertation, "Developing Meta-Awareness about Composition through New Media in the First-Year Writing Classroom," explored how college writing courses can use digital composition assignments, such as composing a digital video, to support student learning.

Dr. VanKooten looked for evidence of "meta-awareness about composition" as students composed videos in two first-year writing courses at a major university. In the study, meta-awareness was defined as knowledge of thinking strategies for writing combined with how students choose to put this knowledge into practice.

Through analysis of video interviews, class observations recorded on video, and student-authored documents, Dr. VanKooten advanced her thesis that meta-awareness about composition involves both actions and articulations, and that video composition is particularly suited for developing meta-awareness.

She explained, "Students developed meta-awareness through what they *said* about their learning — through what they articulated about how and why they made compositional choices — in combination with what they *did* when they actually created their videos — the choices that were observable in their products. Video was useful for developing meta-awareness because it sparked interest, it allowed students to compose for audiences inside *and* outside of the classroom, and it facilitated the use of visuals and sounds along with words."

Flanked by her dissertation co-directors Drs. Anne Ruggles Gere and Bump Halbritter, Dr. Crystal VanKooten stands with her award.

In her dissertation, Dr. VanKooten also provided guidelines for teachers of writing who seek to design instruction that helps students develop meta-awareness. She suggested that teachers of writing develop instruction that:

- supports both actions and articulations
- highlights multiple areas of writing knowledge
- sparks interest
- uses assessment to facilitate the messy process of learning

Presented annually since 1990, the Hugh Burns Best Dissertation Award was created to promote scholarship, research and teaching in the field of Computers and Composition. Dr. VanKooten received her award at the Computers and Writing Conference, which was held in May at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. She earned her Ph.D. in English and Education from the University of Michigan and currently teaches first-year composition courses and courses in digital media writing and rhetoric at Oakland University.