

CHAPTER 12.

OPEN-MEDIA ASSIGNMENT DESIGN TO ADDRESS ACCESS AND ACCESSIBILITY IN ONLINE MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

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In this chapter, the authors describe open media assignments used in online, real-time learning. Specifically, the authors offer guidance for applying the principles of Universal Design for Learning and as well as considerations for technological access when designing online multimedia assignments. In describing their “better practice,” this chapter addresses the themes of accessibility and inclusivity and multimodal learning.

FRAMEWORKS AND PRINCIPLES IN THIS CHAPTER

- **GSOLE Principle 3.4:** Instructors and tutors should migrate and/or adapt appropriate reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories from traditional instructional settings to their OLI environment(s).
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Creativity:** The ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Flexibility:** The ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Metacognition:** The ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

GUIDING QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BEGIN READING

- To what degree is it ethically responsible for online instructors to

assign multimodal projects to students who likely have disproportionate access to composing technologies?

- What support structures do online students need to successfully complete complex, long-term multimodal projects?
- How can students exercise agency in making decisions not only about project topics but also the *media* in which they compose these projects?

INTRODUCTION

Multimodal composition projects such as webtexts, videos, podcasts, and other texts that use various combinations of written, visual, audio, and spatial modes of communication are often seen as challenging to teach, especially when the class is online (i.e., real-time, any time, or hybrid). Assigning multimodal projects in online courses may result in problems due to disproportionate access to expensive machines and programs; the differing abilities, skills, and experiences students and instructors bring to the task; and the limited access online students might have to multimodal composing support networks (e.g., a writing center that provides consulting services). In short, online writing instructors must consider how the challenges with online education might be exacerbated for students composing multimodal texts.

Moreover, some students prefer online (any time or real-time) education because of work or family responsibilities, unpredictable schedules, or health issues, which might make the time needed for composing multimodal projects more daunting. Others might prefer online courses because of learning styles or disabilities, which also might make managing large, multi-faceted projects more difficult. If not avoid them altogether, a “safer” route might be to minimize their complexity or make lockstep assignments with detailed and often prescriptive instructions that undermine learning. As such, it may be tempting for online instructors to avoid multimodal composition assignments, an issue Jessie Borgman (2019) addresses in “Disrupting Hesitation: Why Online Instructors Fear Multimodal Assignments and How to Overcome the Fear.”

In this chapter, we explore two obstacles for students working with multimodal composition in online courses—access and accessibility—and suggest using open media platform assignments as our “better practice” to help students mitigate some of the challenges. We define “access” in this chapter as students owning or having convenient availability to technologies such as computers, software, and the internet. A student who owns a high-end laptop with programs such as iMovie, Photoshop, and InDesign has more privileged access than students who might use a computer in a school lab or public library or those

students who might be composing with tablets or their smartphones. Even those who have computers might not have equitable access if their machine doesn't have expensive programs on it or the necessary processing speed or memory for rendering large multimodal productions. "Access" can also mean availability of the support structures to help use the technologies, be they online or in person. Since multimodal projects take both technological and human resources, inequitable access places some students at an advantage over others. When we use the term "accessibility," we mean people with various physical, cognitive, mental, and/or emotional abilities can equitably participate and succeed in the activities, assignments, and interactions in the class. Since multimodal projects use various communication modes that may exclude some students, accessibility should always remain a central concern. In addition to disabilities such as sight or hearing loss, accessibility also includes less apparent disabilities such as cognitive differences that might make it harder for some students to navigate procedural tasks or to multitask. As instructors, we don't wish to create more access and accessibility barriers for our students, so it's easy to see why many online instructors shy away from complex multimodal composition assignments.

In this chapter we ask: what might happen if online instructors don't back away from multimodal composition assignments but instead give students the freedom to choose the modalities and media platforms—be they comprised of particular devices, software, and/or online applications—to compose and share their projects? This way they can make informed choices based on their unique access, abilities, and goals rather than avoiding multimodal composition altogether.

The following vignettes are examples of students selecting the modes and media on multimodal assignments in an undergraduate visual rhetoric course:

WILSON

Wilson was a football player at our university during seasons that resulted in multiple bowl games victories and even a national championship. Since he was in an in-person class, at 6 foot, 5 inches and 335 pounds of muscle, Wilson was easily recognizable as a world-class athlete. One of the friendliest and most outgoing students in the class, Wilson would occasionally come up to the front of the class "to teach" and would imitate the instructor, much to the delight of the other students. His peers loved him for his winsome personality and because he enjoyed celebrity status at a school that prides itself on its competitive athletic programs. For the class in which Wilson was enrolled, students were asked to compose a "slice of life" open media project, a multimodal representation of an aspect of their college lives.

Wilson's video starts with a media montage taken from television broadcasts that highlight his performance on the football field. On several occasions the announcers point to exceptional plays by the offensive line and even call out Wilson's name, praising his performance. After over a minute of video footage of him and the team with high-energy music pulsing in the background, the video freezes and goes silent until we hear a voiceover as Wilson introduces himself. In the next segment of the thirteen-minute video, Wilson interviews expert and non-expert sources, asking them about what they understand about the role of the offensive line in football. He starts with students, who have a more difficult time answering the question before shifting to experts including then head coach Jimbo Fisher, other players such as star running back Dalvin Cook, and "the voice of FSU football" Gene Deckerhoff. After the series of interviews, the last segment of the video shows Wilson walking the viewer through a day-in-the-life of an offensive lineman with video footage of the athletic facilities and reflections of how he understands himself as a student, an athlete, and as a father. At the time we're writing this chapter, Wilson's video has been viewed over 93,000 times on YouTube (Bell, 2016).

SAMANTHA

Samantha also chose to compose a video project entitled "Being Hispanic at FSU," where she argues that it's difficult to be Hispanic in north Florida away from her south Florida home community that has a more extensive and diverse Latinx population and culture. However, as she explains, in the process of interviewing her friends, she is surprised to learn that they have different experiences based on their own backgrounds and expectations. She begins her video with video footage of these two friends sitting on a bed talking about their experiences at college with other Hispanic students, especially those from south Florida. Since these two friends grew up in predominantly White communities in the American southeast, they explain how unprepared they were for the practices and interactions with other Latinx students from south Florida (e.g., kissing cheeks, food, music, dancing), which contrast with Samantha's experiences and expectations.

The interviews continue and are woven together with Samantha's experiences and reflections. She doesn't use any voiceover or advanced video editing techniques until about halfway through the project when she includes some general footage of campus, which at first has little to do with the content of the video. However, toward the end of the video, she includes a short clip of a university Latinx dance club and a quick scan of the "Hispanic food section" at an in-town Walmart to show the lack of food diversity in local grocery stores. The footage of

both of these scenes complements and extends the argument she is making at the time in her video. Samantha's video still exists on YouTube, and at the time we're writing the chapter it has had 540 views (Samantha, 2018). While of course lower in number than Wilson's video, given his role as an athlete, the viewership exceeds the circulation of most school-based projects.

SHERIDAN AND SUZANNE

Sheridan and Suzanne responded to a prompt about digital identities, which most students complete by drawing on personal experiences negotiating their own subjectivities. Sheridan and Suzanne chose to develop websites on a similar theme: gendered stereotypes and expectations within online gaming communities.

Sheridan was the president of a campus organization for online gaming. In addition, she was the social media manager for the campus' eSports team. One of the few women in that student organization, Sheridan was hyper-aware of her positionality in relation to "the guys" in the club. She was also well-versed in feminist arguments about sexist and heteronormative representations of gender and sexuality in video games. Her website articulates the differences between "girl gamers" and "gamer girls." According to Sheridan, a "girl gamer" welcomes and encourages the attention she receives as a woman-identifying player, often playing up her sexuality to draw attention to herself and "flirt" in the largely male-dominated space. Conversely, "gamer girls" are "serious" about their gaming. They don't draw attention to themselves and may even represent their avatars as male or androgynous, so they don't have to deal with unwanted attention. Sheridan explores stereotypical depictions of women in video games as she recounts some of her experiences as a gamer girl. Her website is constructed from a Wix template and includes combinations of visual and written texts. The design isn't as important as the argument and the narrative of her experiences, which is the evidence to support her claims. At the time she completed this project, Sheridan was planning an undergraduate thesis project, an interview-based study of an online writing group. Her personal and professional interests connected more to writing-based communities than to visuals and design, which is reflected in the final draft of her website.

Suzanne, while completing a Wix-based website on a similar topic, took a different approach. Her project on the increased inclusivity of the online Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) gaming community is noticeably more aesthetically neat and appealing. She has a drop-down menu navigation bar, and she has images for all six of what she calls "chapters" for this project. Suzanne draws attention to the strategies used by this gaming community to move away from

the more male-dominated landscape to a “sandbox world” that allows storylines and characters that explore contemporary issues and are inclusive of under-represented populations in mainstream media. Suzanne points to the fourth edition of D&D introduced in 2008 where that shift was first enacted, and she provides research and commentary on the varied response to those changes within the gaming community. She also points to “Critical Role,” a weekly broadcast of voice actors playing campaigns that encourage women’s participation and non-standard game play.

Suzanne, who at the time was also preparing for an undergraduate thesis, planned to continue her education in information technology. She saw herself as a creative programmer. In fact, her honors thesis is an experimental hybrid text between a creative and critical project in which she is writing and designing a webcomic that reflects her interests in non-binary character interactions within webcomics. Suzanne’s professional goals and skill set are represented in this project through her design. Even so, she notes her hesitation to use a design template when she has the skills to have created her own webpages.

These student examples represent a range of multimodal projects that students often complete in all classes, but they can be more challenging for online students because of access and accessibility. In the process of adapting our course from in-person learning to online, real-time delivery, we asked ourselves: are the access and accessibility issues too great to continue having students compose multimodal projects? Or, might we be able to implement strategies and better practices that would mitigate those potential inequities?

SCHOLARSHIP, THEORIES, AND PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE OUR APPROACH

We draw on the various versions of a multimodal project on negotiating identities to demonstrate how we believe an open-media platform assignment may address both access and accessibility issues that might prevent instructors from including multimodal assignment in an online class. We use the term “**open-media platform**” to mean that students decide which modalities and media to use based on their own technological access, expertise, abilities, and personal/professional goals, rather than these decisions being predetermined by the instructor and the same for all students (e.g., assigning a video or podcast project). We reject the idea that equity and fairness means that all students need to do the same things in the same ways. Instead, an equitable assignment can allow students to make choices and work in ways that meet their individual needs and circumstances. The instructor’s job, then, is not to create and oversee prescribed media assignments, but rather to create project parameters and goals

as well as provide guidance and support for students working in various software platforms, media, and modes.

In creating a sample assignment sheet, we take inspiration from GSOLE's Online Literacy Instruction (OLI) Principle 1, which emphasizes that online teaching should be universally accessible and inclusive, as well as Principle 3, which challenges teachers to revise online course materials and support to ensure that it is most effective in that environment. Moreover, we have found that open-media platform assignments are more than just equal opportunities for students with accessibility issues; they also align with three Habits of Mind from the WPA-NCTE *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011): flexibility, creativity, and metacognition. Although students might not be accustomed to making their own choices on this level, their enthusiasm and engagement on these assignments show to us how eager they are to take ownership and make these decisions. If online courses are to include open-media platform assignments, they must be designed to respond to concerns about the workload of these assignments for students with differing access to and abilities. Otherwise, the inclusion of open media platform assignments will work against the inclusive and equitable goals of online learning.

COURSE CONTEXT AND LESSON

The assignment we highlight comes from a visual rhetoric class in a major called Editing, Writing, and Media (EWM), which has become a catch-all within our English department. Since our institution doesn't have a journalism program, many see EWM as meeting that demand. Most students see it as a professional degree program for their interests in writing and publishing, and many students pair it with another professional degree such as marketing or public relations. With the exception of about 10 percent of students applying for law school, only a small number of EWM students are preparing for graduate education. Therefore, our students tend to be open to "practical" (or, perhaps more accurately, "practice-based") learning that they get from multimodal assignments like ours since they see the value in developing showcase artifacts for their ePortfolios.

Within the major, we offer three core courses that all students must take: Rhetoric, a historical survey of rhetorical theory; Writing and Editing in Print and Online (WEPO), a production-based class that explores composing practices in various media and modalities; and the History of Text Technologies (HoTT), a historically-based study of textual production with an emphasis on the history of the print technologies. In addition to the core classes, we offer a range of courses that allow students to customize their major. They can take a course on media and/or critical theory, a range of editing and textual production

courses, rhetoric classes, and applied writing courses. In part because of the wide range of possibilities within the major, students don't all have the same interests in learning a variety of media production technologies or producing polished media projects. Like any group of students, they enter our classes with significantly different access to and expertise with premium computer programs like Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, Premiere Pro, or Final Cut Pro. However, nowhere in the description of the major are technology-based learning outcomes. Despite this, many students want to gain proficiency in software to enhance their professional profiles. Thus, our students often want to complete media production projects that include audio projects such as podcasts, web design, photo editing, and video production.

The major was designed to be taught by faculty and graduate students across the English department. While advanced doctoral students teach the gateway courses, most don't get the opportunity to teach upper-level electives. Our authorial team's collaboration began when graduate students Amory, Amanda, and Ashleah were assigned as co-teachers in a mentoring relationship with Michael in two different sections of an elective called "Visual Rhetoric in the Digital World." As fate would have it, the two semesters we taught together were also the two most drastically affected by COVID-19. In the spring of 2020, Amory and Michael were teaching an in-person section when the global pandemic caused a sudden shift to real-time online learning for the second half of the semester. By the fall of 2021 when Ashleah, Amanda, and Michael taught another section of the class, we knew it would be offered in real-time online and had the summer to plan for it.

In our case, the courses met for seventy-five minutes twice a week. Our institution has a professional site license for Zoom, which we used for full-class presentations and discussion; small group work and discussion; and screen and link/file sharing. We use the Canvas course management system to distribute online materials such as reading materials, for submitting assignments, and for grading and response. We also used third-party software such as Google Docs for workshops and collective class notes. Both courses used the same basic reading and assignment structure, but the pedagogy changed in response to the online, real-time delivery.

COURSE GOALS

This course is designed to give students an introduction to rhetorical thinking and analysis as well as visual analysis and production. By the end of the term, students should be able to:

1. Apply rhetorical principles to a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic texts in a way that communicates their ability to provide insight about the texts;

2. Use visuals to find and communicate meaning;
3. Find, manipulate, and produce a variety of visual texts that communicate to targeted audiences;
4. Use a variety of digital platforms to deliver visual media via the internet; and
5. Create thoughtful, academic projects in a variety of media for different audiences.

Key here is the balance between theory and practice, as well as analysis and production. Much like other outcomes within the broader writing community, we note that multiplicity is highlighted in such phrases as “a **variety** of linguistic and non-linguistic texts,” “a **variety** of visual texts,” “a **variety** of digital platforms,” and “a **variety** of media for **different** audiences.” This repetition signals that a single strategy, medium, modality, or approach will not be sufficient for this class. Teaching toward flexibility and a range of possibilities is often more challenging, but the payoff for students is great as a result if they learn to navigate various contexts, audiences, and media.

ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCE

We assigned three, major multimodal projects, each of which spans four to five weeks of a 16-week semester. The first project is an “Investigative Photo Essay” in which students capture, edit, arrange, and caption a set of their own images to make and support an argument about a topic of their choosing. During this assignment, students read and explore ways in which images make meaning (Arnheim, 1969; Barthes, 1977; Foss, 2004; McCloud, 1994), how they are ideological (Rogoff, 1999; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), and how they function socially (Adichie, 2009; Carter, 2008; hooks, 1994; Simon, 2009).

The second multimodal project, which we explore in this chapter, is called “Negotiating Identities” in which students create a multimodal production that explores visual representations of an individual or collective subject position. These identities can include everything from conventional categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, sexuality, disability, religion) or other ways people construct identity (e.g., work, clothing, tattoos, social organizations, athletics, music).

The final multimodal assignment is our “Monument/Memorial (Re)Design Project,” which we detail in Chapter 4 within this collection. This assignment asks students to visually represent a current monument or memorial, analyze the original design, redesign it, and provide a rhetorical rationale for the redesign. While working on this project, students read about collective memory;

the constructed nature of history through public monuments/memorials; and several case studies of monuments such as the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, the Montgomery Civil Rights Memorial, the Joe Louis Monuments, and the 9/11 Memorial (Blair & Michel, 2000; Gallagher & LaWare, 2010; Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Mix, 2015; Nicoletti, 2008; Sturken, 1991). Like the other multimodal assignments, students choose the media and modes, which have included Legos, popsicle sticks, clay, drawings/paintings/sketching, Photoshop, digital video, etc.

In this chapter, we will focus on the identity negotiation project that combines theory in identity politics and issues of social justice with a multimodal composition. As we will detail in the assignment sheet and sequence below, we progress through a range of identity-related issues to which students readily connect and have much to contribute from their lived experiences. The biggest challenge that they often face is finding a clear focus since they have many ideas they want to develop.

“NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES” ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Purpose

For this second project, you will create a multimodal production that explores visual identities of an individual or collective group. These identities include everything from conventional categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, sexuality, disability, religion) or any other areas that in part construct—and are constructed through—identity (e.g., work, clothing, tattoos, social organizations, athletics, music).

This project can be historical or contemporary, personal or about others. Importantly, this project must go beyond description to articulating and supporting a position on the topic. Note that some of the most interesting work in identity today lies in the overlap between identity positions. For instance, if you are exploring representations that include gender, race, and sexuality, you must grapple with the inability to isolate those subject positions from one another and instead decide how they function collectively. Since identity is not fixed and absolute, you must think of ways to represent it as fluid, constructed, and negotiated.

This is an open media platform project. In other words, all media platforms are acceptable as long as they allow you to integrate the range of modalities you need to make and support your positions to your target audience. Former students have composed their projects in a range of multimodal platforms: digital video, slide shows, Prezi presentations, webtexts, image-embedded documents, and more.

Skills

Students will . . .

- **Identify** a topic of interest related to visual rhetoric and identities.
- **Investigate** the topic through primary and/or secondary research.
- **Determine** an angle and position to take on the subject.
- **Support** the position through argument and examples.
- **Design and assemble** a multimodal production that considers the affordances (what the technology allows for or does easily) and constraints (what challenges or difficulties will result from its use) of the chosen platform to effectively convey your argument.

Knowledge

Identities will be explored and explained as . . .

- multiple, contested, fluid, shifting,
- both seen and unseen,
- integral to how we understand ourselves in relationship with others,
- negotiated as we communicate with others,
- never neutral,
- central to the hierarchies that exist within our communication practices and, in turn, our society, and
- framed through images circulated within various communities.

Task

1. Select an issue related to visual rhetoric and identity that you want to explore for this project. In class we will explore everything from more traditional representations of identity (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, disability) to other aspects of identity that might not be relevant to students (e.g., majors, jobs, clubs, families, stereotypes, clothing, body art).
2. Once you select a topic, complete some preliminary research, looking at ways that this topic is represented. Also think about how this identity issue overlaps with other identity issues and to what effect. You might also consider how this identity issue is fluid, how it changes, and/or how it is negotiated by individuals. Research might include finding traditional academic sources, and/or it might include primary research such as capturing your own photographs, interviewing or surveying relevant subjects, collecting images and video online.
3. As you investigate the topic, look for an angle to develop a position on the subject. You need to do more than merely describe this identity position.

4. Once you have your sources and your ideas for the project, determine what media platform is best to create what you've collected for the audience you envision.
5. Conference with the instructor(s) to discuss available options and your composing plan.
6. Begin composing your multimodal project.
7. We'll have checkpoints along the way so you'll receive feedback from the instructors and your peers.
8. Consider the feedback you've received as you develop the final version of the project.
9. Complete the following reflective questions about your project:
 - How/why did you come up with your topic?
 - What primary and/or secondary research did you complete for this project? Why?
 - How did you come up with the angle and argument for this project?
 - What media platform did you select? Why?
 - What did you do in response to the feedback you received from your instructors and peers?

Criteria for Success

For this project, we will provide comments and evaluate it based on the following criteria:

- Identify and describe an issue related to visual identities.
- Develop a position about the topic.
- Provide commentary on the images.
- Organize the visual and linguistic texts.
- Edit the multimodal texts.

OVERVIEW OF UNIT AND ACTIVITIES

The following readings and activities are all part of a large scaffolding in which we hope to prepare students for the work they will need to do on their larger projects. While Unit and Project Two focus explicitly on visual identities, that theme is introduced earlier in the semester and is a thread that runs throughout the course. Irit Rogoff (1999) provides a framework to understand the work of visual culture:

1. Images are claimed by various and often contested histories,
2. Viewing apparatuses guided by cultural models (e.g., technology or narratives), and

3. Subjectivities of identification from which we view and by which we inform what we view (p. 18).

This third aspect, then, becomes the focus of our unit on negotiating identities. As Rogoff points out, visuals can never be objective or neutral, and the work of visual culture becomes responding to how cultural, ideological, political, and historical contexts shape how and what we see.

Even before we start into the unit on negotiating identities, we've already begun to explore how people view images from particular subject positions. One of our lessons has students watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) "Danger of a Single Story," which many students will have seen before in middle or high school (https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en). In this TED Talk, Adichie argues that repeated narratives about someone or a group of people can become "single story" stereotypes. She describes her experiences coming to the US for college and realizing what Americans believe about Africa (and thus her) were based on singular narratives of poverty, war, disease, and starvation from the news, books, and media. Since the focus of our class is visual, we apply Adichie's concepts to the circulation of images through advertisements, movies, and other media that are so common that they create "single stories," flattening the diversity and experiences of individuals or groups. Once we've introduced this concept, we ask students to present and then complicate "single story" images, which they readily tackle by identifying visual narratives of racial or ethnic groups, student athletes, clubs and organizations, religious groups, occupations, and more.

Another way we introduce viewing subjectivities is through bell hooks' (1994) "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life" in which she writes about Black people choosing self-representation through the photographs they display at home. The article opens with a black and white photo of hooks' father as a young man in a pool hall. He's posing in a white t-shirt, smiling for the camera. While one of hooks' sisters is mortified by the informality and "scandalous" nature of the pool hall photo, another sister is indifferent to it, but bell loves it because in it she sees something in her father that she never knew. We ask students to consider how they might view images in different ways than others and how people make different meanings of photos based on their positionality, beliefs, and assumptions. Later in the article, hooks discusses losing a picture of herself in a cowgirl Halloween costume, which devastates her because it represents what she calls "proof that there was a me of me" (1994, p. 57), something foundational to how she sees and understands herself. The lost picture is a loss of the happier moments of her childhood. Always looking to engage students in active

applications of the readings, we ask students to locate pictures of themselves that they might consider a “me of me.” In sharing these photos, they explore and attempt to explain how and why certain images carry deeper significance regarding their identities.

While we have other early readings and assignments on identities, these two demonstrate the kinds of activities we use to introduce the idea and to get them to apply their learning in low-stakes, media production. Thus, by the time we get to the unit on negotiating identities, students have already thought about subject positions and identities, which will help them move into their larger project. After introducing the assignment and viewing models from previous semesters, we dive into invention activities that encourage them to consider a wide range of identity-based issues.

While a difficult read for many students, Sue Hum’s (2007) article on the racial gaze is a class favorite in part because she uses the original Disney cartoon *Mulan* to argue that racial representations are trivialized and erased through the processes of authenticity and universality in visual culture. Hum argues that authenticity (realism), which seems positive at first glance, reduces race to stereotypes located in images of culturally specific clothes, plants, animals, or objects that ultimately denies deeper differences as it simulates realism for the viewer. Similarly, universality (sameness) erases racial identity or makes differences seem inconsequential by simulating naturalism for the viewer.

After grappling with Hum’s analysis of *Mulan*, students are eager to point to other media with the same problem, often starting with other Disney princess movies but then moving out to other films and visuals in our culture. A local connection we make to our institution is our school mascot, which remains a Seminole despite decades of protest and recent moves within college and professional sports to replace racist mascots. When college athletics first challenged our appropriation of Chief Osceola, an important historical figure who fought against European colonization, the conversation turned to authenticity, which reframed the debate away from minoritized people groups being mascots to one centered on the inauthenticity of Chief Osceola’s costume. The offense wasn’t the mascot himself, but rather the inauthentic, stereotypical costume. Once the problem of inauthenticity was identified, the logical solution was to provide a more historically accurate costume. Even though Hum’s article is already relatable because she uses a popular Disney example, applying her ideas to another localized situation helps students see applications beyond film.

A similar lesson is based on Jay Dolmage’s (2014) “Framing Disability, Developing Race: Photography as Eugenic Technology,” which chronicles photographic representations of disability at the turn of the twentieth century on

Ellis Island. Under the auspices of creating an objective catalog of immigrants, the photographs reinforced the “ideal immigrant” through comparisons of everything from skin color to height to the size, shape, and proximity of facial features. Thus, in one “snapshot evaluation,” border officials determined the desirability and even supposed mental health and capability of the immigrant. We also read Chris Carter’s (2004) “Writing with Light,” that makes a similar case that the photography of Jacob Riis—who was largely understood as a progressive philanthropist—only reinforced divisions and provided a safe form of border crossing in which middle- and upper class-people could “experience” the plight of immigrants (p. 139). In response to readings such as these, students create a continuum of racial representations that purport to be progressive but instead flatten or otherwise diminish the values they supposedly espouse.

With a thread of accessibility running throughout the class and its emphasis within this second project, our goal is for students to become more aware of themselves as viewing subjects and how their viewing then shapes—and is shaped by—their identities. As such, students have developed thoughtful and engaged media projects on a range of topics—views of mental health, images of LGBTQ+ in popular Netflix shows, Catholic iconography, strong women characters in science fiction, and the list goes on and on—that investigate and explore visual representations.

REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

As we defined in the introduction, we considered access and accessibility to cover two related but distinct areas: 1) access: ownership or availability to use technologies and support for them, and 2) accessibility: the assurance that people with various (dis)abilities can equally participate in the activities, assignments, and interactions in the class. In this section, we refer to GSOLE’s Online Literacy Instruction (OLI) Principles 1 and 3 as our framework for technological access/accessibility. Designing open-medium platform assignments with access in mind also opens up opportunities that align with three of CWPA, NCTE, and NWP’s Habits of Mind—flexibility, creativity, and metacognition—for all students, not just those who might otherwise struggle with the assignment based on access issues (*Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, 2011).

TECHNOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND/OR AVAILABLE USE

Online Literacy Instruction (OLI) Principle 1 states “online literacy instruction should be universally accessible and inclusive,” while its tenets on accessibility and inclusivity elaborate that:

- Multimodal composition and alphabetic writing may require different technologies; therefore, those involved should be appropriately prepared to use them (Accessibility and Inclusivity Tenet #3).
- The student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes mobile-friendly content, interaction affordances, and economic needs (Accessibility and Inclusivity Tenet #4).

Since our real-time online students may not have had access to on-campus resources (e.g., libraries, digital studios, writing centers), we had to consider the additional constraints they might encounter with multimodal assignments. Take, for example, Wilson's and Samantha's videos from earlier in our chapter. Wilson had privileged technological access because, as an athlete, he had the equipment and video support resources in the form of a media specialist to assist him, which is reflected in the quality of his video project. Receiving technological help was explicitly allowed for this assignment as long as the students were engaged, learning, and the ultimate decision-makers in the composing process, much like we expect if they receive help from the writing center. Because of his privileged access, Wilson's final project has many bells and whistles such as spliced television footage, layered audio, and smooth cuts for transitions, not to mention access to our head football coach and other collegiate players.

Samantha's video, meanwhile, thoughtfully presents an argument that demonstrates an evolution in her thinking about identity and how her experiences might differ from others who she assumed would have shared experiences based on ethnicity. She effectively conducted primary research, and she provided observations and evidence to support her claims. The video meets all the expectations of the assignment criteria, yet Samantha's video lacked some of the splashiness of a polished video. She almost certainly used her phone to capture the audio and video, which meant the sound and picture quality were limited. The video editing software—and her expertise with it—were more rudimentary as well. Cameras, tripods, microphones, and editing software are all expensive. Likewise, Samantha had no professional goals that included video editing, so it was not in her interest to spend the time and money to acquire the software and expertise to develop a more professional video. Nonetheless, Samantha created a successful multimodal project within the constraints of her own abilities, needs, and goals, which is a primary goal of the open-media platform assignments.

Not all students have an equal need or desire to learn certain multimodal production technologies, so we lean heavily on self-motivation and personal/professional goals to drive students' choice of when they need to invest in and learn these technologies. While we provide some limited support in and out of class, our strategy is to point students to resources that will enable them to set

their own expectations and meet their own goals. This is especially important because, as English instructors, we often don't have the knowledge or skills that some of our students have or might need to complete these projects. Something we regularly tell ourselves is that we don't want our own lack of expertise to limit their projects. The best way we have found to address these inequities is to allow students to make their own choices and not to penalize students who, to their credit, do thoughtful projects that may not have engaged in the same level of technological expertise.

FLEXIBILITY TO ACCOMMODATE VARIOUS (DIS)ABILITIES

In addition to students having access to computer technologies and the support to use them to develop their multimodal projects, the “better practice” of open-media platform assignments is also mindful of the various (dis)abilities that students embody, be they physical, mental, and/or emotional abilities. The principles of Universal Design for Learning (Brueggemann, et al., 2001; Vie, 2018; Womack, 2017) encourage educators to make assignments with built-in flexibility so that disabled students do not have to self-identify or provide diagnostic evidence that might trigger an accommodation, usually in the form of more time on a project or an alternative assignment. If assignments include built-in flexibility for all students, they can proceed in ways that best fit their abilities, goals, and skills. When students are allowed to make modalities and media decisions for themselves, disabled and neurodiverse students can complete the assignment under the same description and parameters as all students. We are not the only authors to theorize the power individualization can have on creating more accessible OLI. In Chapter 9 of this collection, Ada Hubrig and Anna Barritt similarly encourage online educators to embrace a more flexible approach to drafting and revision with their “Works-in-progress” practice, giving students choice in how they illustrate their learning.

The open-media platform assignment model also corresponds closely with OLI Principle 3:

Instructors and tutors should commit to regular, iterative processes of course and instructional material design, development, assessment, and revision to ensure that online literacy instruction and student support reflect current effective practices.

In particular, OLI Principle 3's fourth tenet is pertinent: OLI Design and Pedagogy specifies the role of the instructor is to “migrate and/or adapt appropriate reading, alphabetic writing, and multimodal composition theories from

traditional instructional settings to their OLI environment(s).” We also interpret this principle as an exercise in flexibility—the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands—for both instructors and students alike.

We believe it would be a shame if multimodal composition did not migrate to online classes since they are central to student engagement, creativity, and investment in writing for public audiences outside of the academy. Earlier sets of online writing principles such as *A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)* (CCCC, 2013) suggested that online courses should focus exclusively on writing and not multimodality: “OWI Principle 2: An online writing course should focus on writing and not on technology orientation or teaching students how to use learning and other technologies.” As online instructors, we understand this impulse. Teaching online is challenging, and certain aspects of the course need to be simplified and streamlined (see our other work, Chapter 4 in this collection, about scaffolded assignments); however, multimodal composition is not a peripheral component of the class that we’d be willing to cut to streamline the course. At the same time, we understand the various technological challenges that accompany this type of the assignment, which is why we believe it’s important for students to make their own decisions about what media platforms they will use for the multimodal projects, which they can base in part on their own access and accessibility.

HABITS OF MIND

With an open-media platform assignment, students should be given the opportunity to reflect on their work, which helps foster three different “habits of mind”: flexibility, creativity, and metacognition. The “habits of mind” refer to “ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2011, p. 5).

Building flexibility into an assignment allows students to, as *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011), states, “approach writing assignments in multiple ways, depending on the task and the writer’s purpose and audience” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2011, p. 9). While COVID-19 was the exigence for our course revision, it provided us with opportunity to re-conceptualize better practices as we adapted the course for online delivery. The shift to online—first in the emergency scenario of the pandemic but then in a more intentionally-crafted online course design—allowed us to reconceptualize the class for better access and support while remaining committed to multimodal composing. While we had experimented with open platform assignments

before shifting online, this flexibility became essential for the way we thought about multimodal assignments in online environments in order to address our concerns about access and accessibility. For these multimodal assignments, students took full advantage of the freedom to choose.

- what identity issues to explore (e.g., race, sexuality, disability, gender, stereotypes, anxiety/depression);
- which parts of their lives to represent (e.g., family/home life, college jobs, future careers, campus organizations, extra-curricular activities, and personal hobbies);
- what media platform to use (e.g., videos, podcasts, Prezis, webtexts, photo essays); and
- what modalities to compose in (e.g., audio, visual, spatial, gestural, written, multimodal).

For Wilson, because football was such an important aspect of his personal and professional identity, his project was a slice of life on what it meant for him to be an offensive lineman on the university football team. For Samantha, her personal experiences and expectations (as well as those of her friends) were central to her argument and her representations of culture, language, food, music, and more. For Suzanne and Sheridan, their gendered interests in digital gaming communities drove the content and delivery of their webtexts. When students have the freedom to develop their own interests in digital spaces that have the possibility of reaching authentic audiences on topics they care about, their investments tend to be deeper and more meaningful.

Creativity is central to the design of this assignment as well. As educational spaces—including writing classes—are becoming more standardized and subject to top-down administration, multimodal composing itself emphasizes creativity in various forms while potentially still fulfilling more traditional objectives of the class, such as making and supporting an argument, conducting primary and secondary research, organizing or arranging materials, and even learning and using mechanics through editing. Even with those more traditional goals, multimodal composing allows for combining linguistic and non-linguistic texts, building/making a composition using a range of materials and tools, and distributing that composition broadly to academic and non-academic publics. Students, many of whom are bored or disenfranchised from years of traditional education, are often energized and engaged in multimodal composition in surprising ways. It's not uncommon for students to report that they work harder and longer on these types of "creative" projects than anything else in their college careers. Plus, they provide opportunities for students to showcase their creative prowess to potential employers, friends, and families.

As the course objectives for the visual rhetoric class hold a commitment to multimodal composing, we ask students to consider their own socially and educationally informed choices about the technologies they use to compose multimodal projects. Therefore, assigning the “Rhetorical Questions” our students write at the end of the project is necessary, as it asks them to reflect on the creative choices they made and the challenges that might have emerged when they chose a certain platform and modes to present their argument. Writing about why and how they composed something also gives them the chance both to defend their creative choices as well as to think about what they would do differently next time—such as when Suzanne noted her ambivalence of using a template when she could create her own design.

CONCLUSION

As online and hybrid classes are becoming more of the norm rather than an exception, we’re excited to see the affordances they provide both teachers and students. Involuntarily shifting to online instruction and then teaching the redesigned class in a more intentional manner as an online, real-time delivery provided an interesting opportunity for us as co-instructors to consider the adjustments that we’d need to make for ourselves and the sake of our students. One point of tension for us was that we wanted to keep our dynamic, creative multimodal projects—which have long been central to the engagement and investment of students in the class—while also being mindful of access and accessibility issues of these projects as well as students’ differing personal and professional goals. Therefore, we leaned heavily on our “better practice,” the open media platform assignment, to address our two primary concerns regarding access and accessibility.

By allowing students to select the media platform for their multimodal projects, they had the opportunity to think about their own access to technologies, their own goals, and their own abilities, they could decide for themselves how to approach the modalities and media required of the projects. For some, it would make sense to invest in a computer, software, or the time to develop the expertise to use a particular program. For other students, that cost would not be worth the financial or personal investment. These students could still complete smart, engaging projects that fulfilled all the criteria for the assignment.

In making choices about the media platforms, students could also consider their own accessibility needs. If they had more or less aptitude or ability to work in certain media, they could make the choice about what modalities of communication (text, image, audio, or video) might be emphasized in the various programs. Students in the class were taught to make all their media projects accessible through alt-texts on images and closed captioning on videos, yet the open

media platform project moved beyond that baseline to allow a more universal design appropriate flexibility in the ways students could engage with, complete, and circulate their media projects. As students consider their own strengths and limitations, they choose media platforms in modalities that best accommodate their needs and goals.

Our desire is that multimodal projects will continue to play a central role in the production assignments in our classes, regardless of the mode of course delivery. Students who take online classes should have the same access to engaging, creative course content and composition projects as students in face-to-face classes. Just because technological access and student abilities might present challenges in online instruction, we still believe that one step toward better accessibility practices include student agency in selecting the media platforms they will use to complete these assignments. In doing so, they can consider their own unique access, needs, and abilities as they determine how to develop the projects and share their voices.

MOVING BETTER PRACTICES ACROSS MODALITIES

- **In-Person, Real-Time Learning:** class sessions can be used to discuss the benefits and limitations of various media platforms they might use to complete the project task. Instructors might lead the class in an exercise where students generate a list of media platforms (e.g., Canva, Wix, iMovie). Students may use their own devices to test one platform in small groups before reporting back on their experiences to the rest of the class. In another class period, students might show each other examples of their work in formal or informal peer reviews.
- **Online, Real-Time Learning:** platforms such as Zoom have breakout rooms where students could work in smaller groups to share their screens as they plan, test, and otherwise reflect on their progress. This will allow them to discuss options and choices they are making on their open-media platform assignments and troubleshoot technical issues.
- **Online, Any Time Learning:** students could post project ideas or outlines to discussion boards or shared documents (e.g., Google Docs) where they could view and make comments on the possibilities of different media platforms.
- **Hybrid Learning:** since students are likely working in different settings and times, providing a discussion board platform or shared document might help organize the feedback regardless of when/how it's complete.

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