

## **.Encouraging a Different View of Writing:**

### **Transitioning to a Multimodal Model in WAC Courses**

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#### **Introduction**

Today, most critics agree that an increased focus on visual, audio, and technological elements of writing (commonly known as multimodal writing) are necessary to prepare students for employments in the real world. So, how do these calls actually change writing instruction within our WAC/WID courses? While these calls for multimodal models are being embraced on a national level, moving toward such models within our writing program has presented challenges, experimentation, and possibilities. This presentation will focus on varied initiatives already incorporated in our WAC and other writing courses to educate our students and faculty about multimodal genres. These initiatives included: redesigning curriculums and assignments, implementing professional development workshops, and taking strategic action to educate faculty about the purpose and need for more multimodal writing instruction. We will examine how these methods have allowed us to traverse disciplinary boundaries, and connect with instructors across the curriculum.

- Mr. Paul Conner, Senior Lecturer at the University of Toledo, will argue that the subject matter in multimodal WAC classrooms should be action-oriented: a poster session, website, or graphic memoir are some multimodal techniques that could challenge

students to study and write about local problems from a variety of WAC disciplines and perspectives, and connect with local communities in a call for action.

- Dr. Anthony Edgington, Director of Composition at the University of Toledo, will discuss methods writing program administrators can use to better educate experienced and novice writing instructors, along with themselves, about the value in creating a stronger focus on multimodal writing assignments in writing classrooms.

### **The Argument: Writing to Compete for Future Employments**

I will now begin the presentation by arguing that WAC instructors might challenge conventional writing assignments by generating innovative projects that engage the creative, techno-literate, and organic capacities of a new generation of writers who need to learn more than traditional conduits of writing to emerge as relevant writers in a competitive global environment. Literacy carries new meanings in response to new media, and the millennials are already sophisticated consumers of varied texts, imagery, and film when they visit and respond to websites, online newspapers, blogs, wikis, video games, and social media. New writing opportunities in the future will be electronically-based, so writers will have to be schooled and skilled in new modes across WAC curriculums; multimodal techniques should be added to more traditional writing courses to prepare students for future employments in all fields of study. Instructors must equip a diverse student population to write analytically and successfully in an age of rapidly increasing globalization; future workplace writing demands new multimodal inventions and integration of visual genres and technologies. As Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) concurred almost a decade ago, the future of most writing will occur in digital environments that include multiple modalities to convey meaning, such as video, imagery, sounds, music, color,

words and animation. This does not mean that we abandon rhetorical principles of conventional communication, but this does mean that writers have more options to communicate.

Writing instructors should challenge conventional writing assignments by generating innovative projects that engage the creative, techno-literate, and organic capacities of a new generation of writers who need to learn more than traditional conduits of writing to emerge as employable writers with strong, original voices in a competitive global environment. The ability to synthesize and express ideas in exciting new ways through encoding imagery and sensory details boosts students' creativity, analytic thinking, and strengthens their writing voice.

### **Experimentation beyond the Conventional: A New Cohort of Writers**

As active users of new media, techno-savvy students across disciplines in universities are knowing in their literacy capabilities, as they continue to embrace rapid changes in human communication. This drives the urgency to rethink what writing should be in WAC and WID courses (Bridwell-Bowles, Powell, & Choplin, 2009). Employments in the real world demand that students be active in a type of experiential learning that focuses on preparing them for real world writing situations that are hyper-textual and multimodal in nature (Bamford, 2003). For example, to experiment with these notions I created an innovative, multimodal research project for my business writing class. For the first half of the semester, students learn all the required components for the course, and then integrate their knowledge of these components by creating a sales advertising campaign for the City of Toledo that centers on bringing foreign corporations as investors to our city. The final product is a professional advertising portfolio that includes an unsolicited sales proposal as well as all types of original marketing documents, such as brochures and magazines, a DVD video mock-sales pitch, and PowerPoint presentations that include music

and YouTube videos of Toledo. Students produce their own videos using whatever technology they own, and these videos are uploaded to a special Facebook page for business-writing students. Students consider this assignment to be a real-life, experiential project that will be useful to them in their future employment. This type of activity confirms the thinking of Bridwell-Bowles, Powell & Choplin (2009) that the opportunity to extend the boundaries of writing using digital media in WAC classes provides unlimited opportunities for student expression.

Another multimodal in-class Team activity that I created for a business writing class had students selecting and creating an advertising campaign to sell a product on the Home Shopping Network. They had to appraise the product's usefulness and value, its fair market value, assess audience demographics, and determine who would likely buy the product. Students then created an advertising/sales campaign pitch, and then wrote the script and filmed the ad, which they posted to YouTube and uploaded to a new class Facebook page. Individually, students also wrote a Process Memo that detailed the organizational Team process and evaluated the success of the advertisement. Several of my colleagues added this assignment to their courses with very successful results.

In 2013, I decided to experiment with specialized Facebook pages for every course I teach; these pages serve multiple functions: as a growing library of open-source information on specialized topics, as a training ground in summarizing and analyzing information, as a place to upload students' self-produced videos on specified subject matter, and as a tool to develop sophisticated, cogent, and respectful responses to others' analytic comments and summaries of electronic texts. As 99 percent of my students are rapid consumers of this type of new media, this project has become a multimodal writing environment in which students flourish (Bamford,

2003) because millennials are already adept at digital literacies on *iphones* and tablets, and are actively engaged in popular multimodal discourses on the Internet. Students' digital lives actively connect with multimodal knowledge communities like Facebook, YouTube, Reddit etc. Some instructors might think that the essence of these social networks is not academic, but when I began to create a Facebook page for every one of my writing classes in lieu of assigning a journal or a blog, students resoundingly agreed that the use of Facebook was better than a traditional journal or blog because using Facebook:

- built community among students,
- served as a library of shared research material specific to class assignments,
- taught them to analytically summarize the articles, which prepared them for longer analytic research assignments,
- and, comments/responses to Facebook postings engaged students in further analysis or debate and taught them to take a rhetorical position regarding the topic.

Writing in multimodalities using digital modes does have tremendous potential for the academy (Bridwell-Bowles, Powell, & Choplin (2009). Undergraduate departments across the academy should recognize the value of having students write in multimodalities, as the ability to compose in multimodal and new media texts is a skill sought by most of today's employers. Discipline-specific instructors should assist students to locate their writing voice using all available means and modes of persuasion (Allan, 2013).

In the twenty-first century multimedia world, effective arguments rely on power of images to persuade audience. Millennia ago, ancient orators knew the importance of visual vividness, as audiences are more likely to pay attention and be persuaded by visual images

painted by the speaker's text. In his *Rhetoric* (Book III, Chapters 10-11) Aristotle describes importance of words and graphic metaphors that should "set the scene before our eyes," and he defines graphic as "making your hearers see things."<sup>1</sup> Aristotle also defines rhetoric primarily as invention, "discovering the best available means of persuasion," and multimodal composing fosters usage of an expanded array of available means.

### **Nurturing a Unique Voice through Multimodal Assignments**

While examining the conflicting positions regarding the development of voice in student writing, and in one of his arguments for improving voice development, Peter Elbow (2007) wrote that a focus on voice can help students embrace writing if they perceive it as a process of "just using your own regular voice,' [so] they usually become less intimidated by writing—often finding words and ideas more easily and even coming to enjoy writing" (p. 178). One of the most challenging aspects for a developing writer is the ability to cultivate an authentic, organic, unique, and creative writing voice; most young writers force themselves to write in a voice that is pretentious, unnatural, and in one they perceive is expected in college writing classes. R. E. Mayer (2005) determined that people learn more deeply [from multimedia presentations] when words are presented in conversational style rather than formal style (207). James Olney states that, "Memory and narrative, together and alike, are the two major epiphenomena of consciousness, the dual defining conditions of our being human and not something else" (417).<sup>2</sup> In response to Elbow, Mayer, and Olney, one of the first assignments I sometimes use in one of my writing classes is the personal memory-narrative because this project relies on the individual

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<sup>1</sup> Please read page 185 from Cheryl Hamilton. *Essentials of Public Speaking, 3rd edition*. Belmont: Thomson, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See James Olney. *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

student's unique avenue of expression, personal experience, and remembrance of the past while employing the alphabetic with other coordinating modes of expression. Some narrative essays came back either with pages of original drawings that represented the scenes they had painted with their words, blending painting and written expression together, or they inserted graphic images from the Internet; this assignment became a very basic tool to introduce multimodal discourse. This first writing experience also became a bridge to transition from a simple, academically-inexperienced organic voice into an original and maturing voice that begins to satisfy standards of academic expression. Using all available means of persuasion, students learn to recognize and embrace their natural voice, and, through rhetorical strategies and multimodal techniques, to improve confidence in their writing voice. Maureen Walsh (2016) is correct in assessing that important changes to literacy pedagogy are occurring in writing classrooms in response to literacy that is needed in contemporary times for reading, viewing, responding to and producing multimodal and digital texts.<sup>3</sup> During these narrative writing exercises, students are encouraged to:

- embrace their linguistic differences, but elevate their linguistic choices;
- develop a consciousness of ethos and pathos;
- select topics unique to their own experience;
- write in a conversational style;
- and, develop creative visual texts that respond to and integrate with the written word.

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<sup>3</sup> Please read Walsh, Maureen. "Multimodal Literacy: What Does It Mean For Classroom Practice?."

*Australian Journal of Language & Literacy* 33.3 (2010): 211-239. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Feb. 2016

## Multimodal Writing: An Evolving Pedagogy

Thais and McLeod (2014) emphasized that “WAC has been aimed at transforming pedagogy at the college level, at moving away from the lecture mode of teaching (the ‘delivery of information model’) to a model of active student engagement with the material and with the genres of the discipline through writing, not just in English classes but in all classes throughout the university” (p. 284). There should be a continued, transformational coevolution among multimodal forms of communication and writing projects in our WAC/WID courses that emphasizes varied modes of linguistic expression that augment active student learning; the addition of multimodal projects enriches student knowledge and analytic skills, improves their ability to convey meaning, and prepares them for real-world employment in a variety of disciplines (Reid, Snead, Pettway, & Simoneaux, 2016). The addition of multimodal activities, or “other” semiotic resources in WAC/WID courses, allows students to compress meaning (i.e. to integrate the alphabetic with the graphic) within whatever discipline they are engaged. For example, in their work on multimodal semiotic analysis, <sup>4</sup> Baldry and Thibault (2010) assessed “meaning compression” <sup>5</sup> in scientific writing, arguing that “scientific texts have always

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<sup>4</sup> The study of signs and symbols, especially the relationship between written and spoken signs. Semiology draws attention to the layers of meaning which maybe embodied in a simple set of representations, such as the five interlocking rings of the Olympic flag. It is concerned with the meaning invested in the sign (signified) and the signifier, the physical representation of the sign.

<sup>5</sup> Maria G. Sindoni explains the meaning compression principles as referring, “... to the effect of the interactions of smaller-scale semiotic resources on higher levels where meaning is observed and interpreted” (p. 69). See *Spoken and Written Discourse in Online Interactions: A Multimodal Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2013.



combined and integrated language and visual images in the making of the specialist meanings of scientific discourses" (p. 70).

Just as in the traditional essay, multi-modal writing should express an awareness of context, purpose, and audience in students' major disciplines and selected future occupations; "social contexts," that is, the culture in which our students live and the institutions within they interact, should also be a component in assessing a multimodal assignment's "effectiveness" (Inoue, 2005). Faculty can grow standards for multimodal assignments, and assessment tools can evaluate the multi-elemental interrelationship of modes in a multimodal text such as: clarity, persuasiveness, arrangement, choice of medium, use of imagery, animation, layout, use of hyperlinks, use of and appeal to senses, and relevance within a specific social context.

When directing a multimodal assignment, instructors should assess proficiencies students already possess regarding available, multimodal means, and assist them in acquiring a multimodal metalanguage<sup>6</sup> that enhances, improves, and coordinates with their basic literacy competencies, so that a multimodal classroom becomes a zone that connects to students' real life-worlds. J. Roswell (2013) concluded that multimodal pedagogies recognize the value of creating texts with multiple modes of communication in the classroom, giving each mode like value, so that varied modes mutually function to generate a deeper textual significance than each separate or singular mode would generate on its own. Palmeri (2012) concluded that multimodal writing stimulates innovative expression, and instead of only using multimodalities in a limited number of specialized courses, such as web design or digital and visual rhetoric, instructors should add multimodal composing into every class in students' majors (p. 156). In specific

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<sup>6</sup> Any language or symbolic system used to discuss, describe, or analyze another language or symbolic system.

examination of alphabetic and video intersections, Palmeri (2012) also defended multimodal composing as unique because it “employs a process-based pedagogy that is specifically informed by the field of composition studies” and “... it places a special emphasis on exploring the intersections between alphabetic writing and video production” (p. 157).

### **Multimodal Writing within a Social Context**

Multimodal writing also encourages students to form perspectives and analyze issues in contemporary society via multiple communication modes. Writing from a multimodal perspective “may well encourage a critical rethinking and reformulation of the relationship between text and society” (Baldry & Thibault, 2006, p. 1). As in visual communication, the graphic elements in multimodal composing are constitutive of contemporary reality, but, according to Machin and Mayr (2015), they also influence and preserve a society’s ideologies (p.19). Therefore, multimodal practice activates awareness of the relationship among modes, learning, and identity, and allows a pedagogy of multimodal composing to respond to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. As G. Kress (2003) has stated: “ The new information and communication technologies have produced the technological condition where all can publish to all...the potentials of these technologies imply a radical social change, a redistribution of semiotic power, the power to make and disseminate meanings” (p. 17). Multimodal assignments expand writing production beyond the traditional essay by supporting the semiotic habits of a generation already wired into digital networks, and align with a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that justify fresh forms of rhetorical invention that influence contemporary writing pedagogy.

## Concluding the Argument and Suggesting Experimentation

Of course, some scholars argue that multimodality is nothing new, which is true, but there has never been a time in history when students had so many rhetorical choices; as Palmeri (2012) states, "...rather than writing a history of multimodal composition completely independent of composition history, this history has always connected with multimodal technologies—it just has not been self-critically aware that this is what it was doing" (as cited in McComiskey 12). Multimodal writing amends concepts of scholarship in universities and colleges, particularly in WAC/WID writing classes, and engagement in this form of writing elevates students' interests and digital abilities, validates their rhetorical choices, and amplifies social change and its influence on academia (Simon, Acostic & Houtman, 2014, p. 66).

In her review of *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, Kristi Cole (2015) examines Palmeri's (2014) argument that multimodal writing in WAC classes enhances a deeper learning of concepts; she states:

"In his epilogue, Palmeri's first of three goals calls explicitly for the involvement of WAC directors in two ways. The first is to 'actively resist the common tendency to present alphabetic writing as inherently the best tool for promoting active learning in disciplinary courses,' instead calling for a vision of 'composing to learn' that emphasizes how the integration of informal writing, speaking, and visual-production activities can enhance students' understanding and application of concepts' (p.150). Instead of writing to learn, composing to learn gives space for multimodalities and engagements in the composing process that could support content engagement across disciplines" (p. 205).

I am not proposing that every WAC/WID or other course engage every assignment as a multimodal activity, but I am proposing that multimodal experimentation is needed. As teachers, we want all students to arrive at powerful linguistic expressions by whatever rhetorical means leads them there, so that students' relationship to writing continues to be competent, enriching, energetic, and productive in their chosen field of study. I urge you to experiment.

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