

# Multimodal Composing: Beyond the Text

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In his frequently cited article on multiliteracy centers, John Trimbur asserts that writing centers will increasingly “see literacy as a multimodal activity in which oral, written, and visual communication intertwine and interact” (29). This transformed understanding of literacy reflects, among other things, changing communication practices in a digital age. Trimbur argues that “these changes in how we read and write, do business, and participate in civic life have some pretty serious implications for our work in writing centers” (29).

Since the publication of Trimbur’s article in 2000, intensely multimodal platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram have inserted themselves into our daily routines, inviting us to engage in almost constant multimodal conversation with the world. Options for creating digital presentations have proliferated far beyond PowerPoint, and students now routinely use Keynote, Google Slides, Prezi, and other applications for generating slide decks that seamlessly integrate sounds, videos, animations, photographs, charts, and other media components. When we compose a “text message,” we now have over 1,000 standard emojis to choose from. And Apple released the first version of iMovie only a year before Trimbur’s article was published; now students shoot and edit complex videos using their cellphones.

How should writing centers support composers whose daily lives are filled with so many different forms of multimodal communication? Clearly a wide range of responses is possible. Russell Carpenter and Sohui Lee, in their introduction to a special issue of *Computers and Composition* devoted to multiliteracy centers, note that “multiliteracy center pedagogy was more varied and complex than we previously imagined” (v). Jackie Grutsch McKinney argues also that each writing center will need to devise an approach that reflects its unique institutional context, including possibilities and



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constraints associated with space, staffing, funding, and mission.

Some centers might find that established writing center practices are sufficient to confront these new challenges. Our spaces and pedagogies are designed to help us engage composers in conversations about rhetorical considerations such as audience, purpose, and genre. These fundamentals can be applied to new forms of composing, such as digital videos and web pages. However, some scholars have cautioned writing centers against changing too radically in order to address multimodal composition. For instance, Michael Pemberton writes that “Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves whether it is really the writing center’s responsibility to be all things to all people [...] If we diversify too widely and spread ourselves too thinly in an attempt to encompass too many different literacies, we may not be able to address any set of literate practices particularly well” (21).

We also find other scholar-practitioners who are exploring the ways centers might productively transform all aspects of their work in light of the challenges and opportunities associated with multimodal composing, including the way writing center spaces are configured, the technologies and resources centers make available, the kinds of compositions centers support, and, most importantly, the kinds of conversations writing center tutors have with composers.

In this article, we explore the diversity of options for approaching multimodal composing in writing centers by thinking through concrete consulting scenarios based on our experiences over the past several years in various institutional contexts. Envisioning specific examples of multimodal projects in the center exposes the complexities of designing an approach to multimodal composing that meets the co-curricular needs of an institution and its students. To this end, we offer two vignettes that are carefully constructed to highlight key challenges related to providing support for multimodal composers. The first vignette features a student working on a slide presentation—a common assignment across the curriculum. In our scenario, the student considers himself to have a nearly complete draft of the presentation. Slide presentations represent interesting cases for writing centers because they often include substantial amounts of writing, but they also include other elements as well. The second vignette focuses on a group of students creating a video. Videos are becoming increasingly common in the writing classroom (see, for instance, VanKooten), so writing center tutors may want to pay more attention to that medium. But videos usually don’t contain a lot of alphabetic text, relying instead on moving and still images, music, and spoken words. They push writing center

workers to step out of their comfort zones.

Together, these vignettes expose challenges related to tutor knowledge and training, access to technology (both hardware and software) and space, and how these forms of composition fit into writing center philosophy and lore. In offering these two vignettes, we are inviting WLN readers to imagine how multiliteracy conversations might unfold within their local contexts. Given current resources, training structures, recruitment practices, and space provisions, what would multiliteracy conversations look like in your center? What short- and long-term changes might better encourage the kinds of conversations you hope to see? For centers that are already doing this work, what have you noticed about the ways specific configurations of spaces, technologies, and training structures shape conversations about multimodal compositions?

### **VIGNETTE #1: SLIDE PRESENTATION**

Tim is a third-year business student enrolled in a beginning entrepreneurship course. The professor has asked him to complete a three-minute presentation featuring a small startup company. The presentation should outline the company's product or service, its strengths and weaknesses, and its growth strategies. The goal is for students to learn more about how small startup companies function as well as about how to develop presentation skills.

Tim arrives at the writing center for his appointment and sits down with Martha, his tutor. When Martha asks Tim about his project, he pulls out his laptop and opens a slide presentation. Tim feels confident because he has done many slide presentations in high school and college. He feels this presentation is nearly finished. How will Martha begin? Will she and Tim view the slides as a standalone entity, or will Tim give the full oral presentation that the slides are meant to support and that Tim will ultimately give to his class? Both of these choices present challenges. If Martha views the slides without the full oral presentation, she will be limited in the type of feedback she can provide. If she opts for the full presentation, she should consider issues of sound, space, technology, performance rhetoric, and more. Does the spatial design of her writing center provide a room with a data projector where Tim can stand up and deliver the planned performance?

Having confronted these concerns, Martha would need to consider how providing feedback on a presentation is different from providing feedback on strictly alphabetic texts (like essays). As digital slide presentations and other digital forms became more available to students in the 1990s, it was common for writing center workers (anticipating Pemberton's warnings cited above) to focus narrowly

on the written content. Images, charts, diagrams, and animations were frequently seen as the responsibility of colleagues in other fields and units. It is likely that Martha, having grown up in a digital age, would appreciate the need to view the slides holistically—to address words, images, and sounds. This approach, however, will require Martha to draw on specialized knowledge about how textual, visual, and aural components work to create meaning. Perhaps she has read, either during training or on her own, Nancy Duarte’s *Slide:ology* or watched David J.P. Phillips’ TED talk “How to Avoid Death by Powerpoint.” If so, she could talk to Tim about how many objects on a slide are optimal, what background to use, and how visuals can be effectively integrated.

Now, if Martha elects to have Tim give the full oral presentation, as he would in class, she must consider not only the impact of the textual and visual components of his slides, but also the oral “text” of his presentation and his style of delivery (pacing, intonation, inflection, body language, etc.). There are any number of things Martha could consider at this point. For instance, how does Tim’s speech align with each slide? Is Tim just repeating verbatim what each slide says or is each slide a jumping off point for something broader? Does Tim stare into the corner of the room or does he make eye contact with audience members? Does Tim speak loudly enough to reach those in the back of the room? All of these considerations are in addition to those concerns tutors routinely address when discussing a written essay. Again, there are logistical considerations as well. For example, will Tim’s louder “classroom voice” interfere with other activity in the center?

This scenario raises a number of issues related to the way writing centers work with students who are composing slide presentations. The success of this consultation hinges on how Martha approaches it—does she have the training, or even the language, to work with multimodal composing? Even if Tim, the student, narrowly conceives of the way a consultation can help him (by focusing only on instances of alphabetic text), Martha might ask questions to get more information (about audience, prompt, type of argument, etc.) as well as provide a richer frame and context by positioning the slide presentation as an interconnection of written words, images, and spoken words all facilitated by the medium of slides on a screen by a presenter. If Martha views the composing process beyond the written word, then a richer frame and context can be created for the slide presentation.

## **VIGNETTE #2: VIDEO ESSAY**

Three students are working together on a group project assigned in their section of first-year writing. They were asked to collabo-

ratively produce a short “video essay” that explores a social issue. Projects can include interviews, voice-overs, on-site footage, infographics, music, and other media elements. All three collaborators visit the writing center together and are assigned a tutor named Winona. They inform Winona that their video essay will explore gentrification, an issue receiving considerable local attention.

When Winona sits down with the group, she discovers that they are just beginning their project but are eager to show her what they have completed so far. As a trained tutor, Winona decides to address some important fundamentals before she screens the group’s video. She invites the group to talk about their assignment. How long is the video? Does the assignment ask them to argue for a particular perspective or are they merely asked to survey the different facets of their social issue? Has the instructor identified a particular target audience for this film? Is it destined for a website that has a larger mission? Winona patiently engages this group in a conversation about the nature of the assignment and the rhetorical context within which their video essay is embedded.

But then it’s time to watch the draft of the video. As with Tim’s slide presentation, screening this project introduces a range of considerations. Perhaps Winona is able to lead the group into a small conference room, shut the door, and play their video on a computer connected to a projector. The group watches the film together, theater style. Winona invites group members to hit pause at any time if they want to interject comments or questions. Alternatively, perhaps there is no conference room or computer dedicated to this purpose. Instead, one group member announces that he has the video loaded on his smartphone. Mindful of the distracting noise the video might generate, Winona takes her personal earbuds out of her pocket and screens the video on the phone. She notices that, while she watches the video, the group of composers tunes out. They check their email on their own devices. Because of the earbuds and the phone’s small screen, Winona’s experience of the film is a private one, and when it’s done she struggles to re-engage the group. The video Winona screens consists of the unedited footage of one neighborhood resident talking uninterrupted for twenty minutes. Winona invites the group to talk about how other documentaries are constructed. She gets them to identify the most important moments in their interview and prompts them to think about visual content that might support those moments: shots of homes, businesses, and schools that reveal the transformations taking place in the neighborhood.

One group member suddenly becomes excited: What if they include a time-lapse shot that depicts a sunrise in the neighborhood! She envisions about five seconds of footage that moves from com-

plete darkness to a beautiful bright morning. Such a shot would be dramatic and engaging. Winona welcomes this suggestion and the enthusiasm it introduces into the conversation. She asks the group members to think about the rhetorical impact of this addition. Does it signal hope? A new beginning? What effect will it have on the audience?

But one of the group members becomes disheartened. This shot would be cool, but it's too complicated. No one knows how to do it, and it probably requires a fancy camera. The deadline for this video is fast approaching, and there's a lot of work remaining. It doesn't make sense to invest a lot of time and energy into a five-second shot meant to enhance the "wow" factor but which doesn't really add much to the video's overall message.

Again, Winona's response to this development in the conversation will reflect a constellation of factors: her own knowledge, skills, and training; spatial, technical, and logistical considerations; and the model of multiliteracy consulting embraced by her center. We could imagine that Winona is an accomplished videographer and that this group was actually assigned to Winona because of her background in video work. Perhaps she moves the group to a computer running Adobe Premiere and shows them that time-lapse is actually relatively easy to implement. Or perhaps her center has partnered with a media lab down the hall, and when her conversation with the group is finished, Winona walks the group over to the lab and introduces them to other people who can help with the technical side of the project. Alternatively, Winona might simply say that the technical concerns of the project are beyond her training and beyond the mission of the writing center, so she isn't able to weigh in on the difficulties associated with the proposed time-lapse sunrise.

With this vignette, we hope to demonstrate (among other things) that technical and rhetorical considerations are not always neatly separable. In Winona's conversation with the group, a promising rhetorical possibility emerges in the proposed time-lapse sunrise. But the exigencies of composing in the medium of video might immediately pressure composers to inquire about technical considerations, and this will have implications for the direction in which the conversation moves.

Additionally, we hope to show that multimodal composing is not always linear. Writing tutors already know that the composing process is recursive, and this is true of multimodal processes as well. Winona's group was still planning and generating ideas, so Winona might have expected that technical considerations would come at a later stage. But in our experience, technical considerations often emerge even at the idea-generation stage; indeed, we often generate ideas based on what we perceive to be technically feasible.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we are not interested in advocating for a specific model for multiliteracy centers. Instead, we align with Grutsch McKinney’s observation that each center “will have to imagine the possibilities in addressing multiliteracies at their individual institutions” (220). We hope to show, through these two vignettes, that conversations with multimodal composers are fundamentally linked to a wide range of concerns, including the following:

1. Tutor recruitment and training. What skills, knowledge, and experiences characterize multiliteracy tutors? Do they have specialized training in specific forms of multimodal composing and/or in the interfaces and workflows required by multimodal compositions?
2. The relationship between consulting, composing, and technology. What technologies are supportive of a multiliteracy approach? At what point (if any) should these technologies be integrated into conversations between tutors and composers? Are tutors trained to use and maintain such technologies? What is our understanding of the way technologies shape idea generation?
3. The relationship between consulting, composing, and space. Are spaces available to accommodate the various technologies and literacies encompassed by a multiliteracy approach? How does the spatial design of centers anticipate the challenges introduced by sound and performance? How do centers prepare for group projects that can only be viewed on screens?

We maintain that a full awareness of how this constellation of factors shapes consulting can enable centers to serve student composers more effectively. If Martha realizes that Tim’s slideshow is part of a larger, multifaceted composition that includes an oral-gestural performance, she will be better-positioned to engage Tim in an effective conversation. If Winona is prepared to connect a rhetorical assessment of a time-lapse shot with technical and practical considerations, her conversation with the group of composers will be more effective. By exploring the complex issues raised in these two vignettes, we hope to prompt conversations and critical thinking about how multimodal consultation can best proceed in writing centers.



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## Reformers, Teachers, Writers: Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiries

Neal Lerner

In *Reformers, Teachers, and Writers*, Neal Lerner draws our attention to curriculum in writing studies, which as he explains, is distinct from, though related to, pedagogy. Lerner argues that because curriculum has been ignored, educational reform has been hindered. Chapters are grouped into three parts: disciplinary inquiries, experiential inquiries, and empirical inquiries, as the chapters explore the presence and effect of curriculum and its relationship to pedagogy in multiple sites and for multiple stakeholders.

Among those multiple stakeholders are writing center professionals who will find some parts of the book particularly relevant: the chapter entitled "The Hidden Curriculum of Writing Centers" and the two appendices: 1) "WOnline Synchronous Tutoring Environment" and 2) "Frequency of Student and Tutor Knowledge Claims with Examples."

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