

Multimodal Tutor Education for a Community in Transition

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As nonprint-based writing is becoming more common in classrooms and increasingly demanded in the workforce, writing centers must continue to adapt our services. To support multimodal writing at Rowan University, Celeste (Writing Center Director) and Rachael (Writing Arts department colleague and writing center ally) sought and received a \$10,000 internal seed grant to develop a multiliteracy center at the Rowan Writing Center. In this transition, we needed to account for a range of familiarity and comfort with multimodality among both tutors and administrators. Through a “community-of-practice” approach to tutor education (Geller et. al), we offer a professional development model designed to ease our writing center into a multiliteracy center that supports multimodal writing. Opting for an organic approach to training as opposed to a top-down approach, we understood that our strongest leadership in some areas of multiliteracy tutor education, for instance, may not come from the director at all—rather, the tutors themselves offer unique experiences, talents, and skills that can and should shape our tutor preparation for multimodal sessions.

While multiliteracy centers typically support writers working on digital and multimodal as well as traditional texts, we wanted to include our tutoring staff in shaping, defining, and advancing the mission of our unique multiliteracy center (described below). As David Sheridan explains in *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric*, “Multiliteracy centers should be spaces equal to the diversity of semiotic [meaning-making] options composers have in the 21st century” (6). Our staff reflects a rich diversity of experiences across semiotic resources that intermingle with their own identities. We believe, with Sarah Blazer, that “the diverse semiotic resources each of us brings to the lives we lead, to the work we try to accomplish daily, are



fundamentally valuable and practically useful” (18). Activating what Gellar et al. call “identities in motion” (54), tutors draw on a range of individualized resources, including backgrounds in music, Photoshop, 3D printing, or even filmmaking, which they’ve gathered from educational contexts, hobbies shared with friends, internships, faith communities, family ties, and more. Tutors’ unique experiences with multimodal writing across the visual, audio, gestural, and spatial modes form the basis of their own developing strategies in composing across meaning-making resources and cultural contexts. We drew from tutors’ repertoires to support them as we shifted to a multiliteracy center, building a new vision from our collective strengths. In what follows, we describe how we took a communities-of-practice approach to building a multiliteracy center, how this approach was inspired by translingual and transmodal theory, and how we drew upon tutor leadership to support this transition for our staff.

OUR VISION: ALL BODIES. ALL VOICES. ALL WRITING.

Bill Cope and Mary Kalantz coined the term multiliteracies as a way to describe the opportunity and challenge of literacy pedagogy in a highly connected, global world. They argue that any conception of multiliteracies must include linguistic resources alongside the multimodal (25). Because we understand identity and language variety to be significant semiotic resources to be developed in multiliteracy center work, we envisioned our center to be rooted in translingual and transmodal values (described below) in order to best harness and support students’ literate agency. That is, we wished to develop tutoring approaches and a center design that serve students as they read and write across modes, languages, and contexts. We also thought of our center as one that should promote inclusion, especially for students of color, neurodiverse students, and first-generation students, among others. While our three-pronged approach to the multiliteracy center—*All Bodies. All Voices. All Writing.*—integrates language, mode, and identity as equally important semiotic resources, for the sake of this special issue, our emphasis centers on our approach to professional development for multimodal, rather than translingual, tutoring.

Translingual and transmodal theories inform our work as we meet the needs of diverse multilingual and multimodal writers. Drawing on scholars like Suresh Canagarajah, Bruce Horner, Min Zhan Lu, and Vershawn Ashanti Young, translingualism, works against monolingualist policies and views that stigmatize language varieties (see Watson and Shapiro). Working against linguistic discrimination, translingualism (with translingual practices like code-meshing) treats language difference as the norm and an asset in the classroom

and beyond. Transmodality borrows from translingualism the idea of the naturally fluid nature of language, suggesting that modes cannot be separated from one another—that they blend and mesh, becoming entangled in unique and valuable ways across rhetorical situations (Horner, et al.). Transmodality questions the perceived superiority of print-based or alphabetic composing in the university. Working out of these theories, we might, for instance, see color and Spanish as equally valuable semiotic resources as alphabetic print or Standardized English (though each of these modes are differently historically-rooted). From this view we'd also note that the colors in a movie poster are inseparable from its text in terms of intention and impact—the modes blend to make emergent and situated meaning.

In our version of a multiliteracy center, we see translingualism and transmodality coming to bear in several ways. First, we hope the center will challenge prior assumptions about the primacy of Standardized Academic English to the exclusion of other varieties, revealing that appropriate language use is negotiated in context. For example, we prepare our tutors to value all languages (and all modes) that each student brings to the center as an asset to that student's writing experiences, and therefore, as tools for integrating into tutoring sessions; to better acquaint tutors with this understanding of language difference, we introduced Vershawn Ashanti Young's theory of code-meshing and considered how we might approach translingual writing features in our tutoring. We also hoped to help tutors and writers revalue the digital and multimodal as important tools for meaning making across audiences and purposes both within and beyond the university. In order to accomplish this goal, we focused our first-year transition efforts on tutor education. In addition to exploring translingualism and transmodality in a multiliteracy center setting, directors interested in implementing multimodal tutor education in their current curriculum may view our experience as a practical model.

TRAINING FROM WITHIN: EXPERIENCE AS A RESOURCE FOR TUTOR EDUCATION

In order to draw from tutor strengths to achieve an organic transition, we implemented a “communities of practice” model, in which, as Anne Geller et al. explain, shared knowledge and tutoring practices in the writing center are non-hierarchical and negotiated among constituents (6-7). Working out of a community-of-practice model, it was important that multimodal tutor preparation emerge from our staff of 35 undergraduate and graduate student tutors, and not merely from our 3 administrators. Thus, we created a special position to promote leadership from within—a multimodal

tutor coordinator. Geller et al. recommend that writing center directors facilitate a “culture of learning” in which leaders emerge from writing center staff, crossing the boundaries of traditional hierarchies. This leadership “goes beyond the mere structural to embrace and value not only the mission and purpose of the work but the diversity of others’ experiences as well” (50).

In the spirit of collaboration suggested by a community of practice, our professional development sessions drew from community leadership; they were led by administrators, our multimodal tutor-coordinator, and tutors who had worked with multimodal texts in and beyond the center. While forefronting tutor leadership, we maintained our role as guides in shaping the vision of the multiliteracy center, mentoring staff, and providing them with opportunities to develop professional identities as multimodal tutors. To introduce multiliteracy work to our staff, we began the 2016 academic year’s orientation and professional development by sharing a draft of a vision statement¹ and introducing readings on multiliteracy theories and approaches to composing. Discussions around the statement focused on how these ideas aligned with our center’s specific goals to serve *All Bodies. All Voices. All Writing.*

New to multimodal tutoring, our tutors needed practical, hands-on experience and strategies that build upon already-developed rhetorical strengths in working with student writers. To support our vision of a multiliteracy center, we hired as our inaugural multimodal tutor coordinator Mikaela Langdon, an experienced multimodal writer, longtime tutor, and graduate student in Writing Arts. Mikaela participated in co-tutoring and observation of sessions and provided feedback for tutors who were less comfortable working with multimodal texts. Additionally, Mikaela offered drop-in support for tutors during office hours in the writing center. Drawing from her design skills (which were developed in Rowan courses and in personal and extracurricular activities), Mikaela collaborated with tutors to develop re-branding materials, such as posters and bookmarks, featuring the writing center’s ability to support multimodal projects. In this way, tutors practiced composing in the modes they’d support in tutoring sessions. Mikaela also provided outreach for the center, promoting our services by visiting classes whose students were at various points in the multimodal writing process.

In her most significant role, Mikaela was a leader in tutor education around multimodal tutoring. She conducted research on multimodal writing resources (such as Arola, et al.’s *Writer/Designer*) to share strategies during professional development workshops to help our

staff hone their skills for working with nonprint-based writing. In preparation for each of these modules, Mikaela talked with tutors to identify areas of concern in working with students' multimodal projects. She reviewed client report forms to determine specific projects that students were bringing to the center. In addition, she collaborated with Celeste, Rachael, and our then assistant director to identify readings for tutors to complement each module. Thus, our professional development sessions were structurally supported by our newly created coordinator position.

"Multimodality and the Tutor's Role," an early education session led by Mikaela, asked tutors to reflect on the rhetorical adaptability and transfer of tutoring strategies. In this session, tutors explored current knowledge about multimodality and how they might apply familiar strategies for tutoring print-based writing to visual and multimodal texts. Mikaela presented on the similarities between multimodal and regular tutoring, where argument, audience, purpose, and tone are transferable across modes; she also addressed the elements unique to multimodal texts, such as image, color, sound, contrast, and arrangement. With Mikaela's facilitation, the session featured transmodal tutoring approaches by highlighting the value of nonprint-based composing and recognizing how rhetorical strategies are adaptable (or not) for meaning making in various contexts. For instance, Mikaela led tutors through a rhetorical analysis of a popular meme. Throughout the discussion, she helped tutors think about the rhetorical strategies working among the modes of color, layout, size, and perspective. Mikaela helped tutors think about how the goal of the meme, with its specific design choices, might be geared toward a particular audience. Thinking about the text from the perspective of readers, tutors were easily able to consider how they might use concern for audience to help a student make rhetorical choices in a multimodal text, just as they would for a print-based text. Thus, our tutor education highlighted some overlap between tutoring traditional print-based texts and multimodal texts, including the value of collaboration in student-guided sessions, and helping writers integrate a range of modes to reach their intended audience and achieve their overall purpose.

In a second session, "Tutoring Multimodal Projects: Strategies for Invention," Mikaela invited tutors to create multimodal texts, drawing from what they already understand as consumers thereof. Tasked with creating new wall art for our center, tutors brainstormed ideas and invented drafts for posters and signage, using a range of found materials from magazine scraps to pipe cleaners, Play-Doh, and leaves. This year's update to this multimodal session featured tutor-invented posters that played with visual design

elements like layout, color, theme, and font, as well as rhetorical considerations for language, style, and tone. The posters depicted common tutoring roles like “The Collaborator” or “The Guide,” with corresponding text and images that offered rich description and examples of how these roles are commonly enacted in the center. Our hands-on workshop encouraged multimodal play and interactivity at early stages of the poster-composing process, while providing less confident tutors with the opportunity to experiment with diverse modes of non-digital invention strategies.

Mikaela’s success in and impact on tutor education helped prepare our tutors for the multimodal sessions they would see throughout the academic year. These multimodal training modules were integrated with more traditional workshops centered on multilingual writing, inclusion, diversity, social justice, and disability, providing tutors with a full range of professional development opportunities that modeled the language of inclusion, language diversity-as-asset, and multimodal dexterity. To support our transition to a multiliteracy center, then, our training curriculum emphasized all writing, as well as all voices and all bodies. Our expanded offerings included invited presentations from the Office of Social Justice, Inclusion, and Conflict Resolution, as well as our Disabilities Resource Center and the Wellness Center, extending our tutors’ discussions around access, equity, and identity in the multiliteracy center. Such partnerships, we have found, can deepen tutors’ engagement in multiliteracy work by locating their tutoring within the wider campus culture, encouraging staff to deepen their understanding of writing center work and its potential.

IMPLICATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE VISION

Writing center administrators looking to develop additional multimodal tutoring expertise among their staff might find it useful to similarly assess and draw upon the unique strengths of their tutors. In this way, a communities-of-practice model can encourage staff to extend their identities into the writing center to inform practices. Our extensive focus on tutor education has allowed our staff to build sustainable leadership within the center. Workshops have opened conversations around future programmatic offerings, rebranding, and the importance of building a tutoring staff who best represent the students we serve. While such a transformation is necessarily a long, organic, and recursive process that must be localized, we hope our reflections here are meaningful for multimodal tutor education and leadership models for writing centers in transition.

We’d also like to emphasize the need for a realistic timeline for building a multiliteracy center. Early in our transition to a

multiliteracy center, we focused on implementing our vision and mission through expanded tutor education. While other centers may choose to enter multiliteracy work through other doors—perhaps through faculty outreach, through programming, or by purchasing technology and materials—our early focus on training has granted our staff confidence in their abilities to tutor across modes and offer multimodal writing support for our campus. Our multimodal tutor-coordinator position helped locate a pillar of expertise within the center, allowing leadership to emerge from within the tutor community. For writing centers whose staff doesn't already include a single expert, administrators might recruit from a relevant program on campus or create a collaborative role shared by several adept tutors. Writing center administrators looking to adopt this model might think of ways a multimodal tutor coordinator might be uniquely positioned to:

1. bridge fellow tutors' current repertoire for print-based writing with those skills needed for multimodal work;
2. conduct research on rhetorical strategies and technical processes to inform workshops, resources, and shared practice;
3. offer formal and informal one-to-one support for tutors through tutor observation and drop-in support hours;
4. draw from tutor insiderness to assess what types of training might be most useful for multimodal tutoring;
5. help with rebranding efforts through development of promotional materials, web presence, and cross-campus partnerships.

Of course, this is a lot to hope for from a single tutor (Mikaela is amazing!), so these responsibilities and efforts are best shared across a variety of staff roles, which could simultaneously maximize buy-in. Further, as Geller et al.'s work suggests, tapping into the coordinator's personal interests, strengths, and experiences (including prior coursework and professional training, as well as self-sponsored literacies and skills) and supplementing from across the staff and campus community will help to negotiate and build shared knowledges, approaches, and practices.

Maintaining a communities-of-practice model of training when transitioning from a writing center to a multiliteracy center requires balance between tutor and administrator agency, experience, and knowledge. Thus, our collaborative training modules allowed for tutor investment in reimagining the mission and goals of our emerging multiliteracy space. This training also helped our tutors value each other as resources as we worked

to shift the culture from one centered around traditional print-based tutoring to one that values inclusion, access, and equity for students engaged in *All Writing*.



NOTE

1. To view our multiliteracy center's vision and mission statement, visit www.scribd.com/document/375101450/Mission-Vision-Statement.

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