

The Impact of Multimodal Composition on First Year Students' Writing

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ABSTRACT

In 2008, the National Council of Teachers of English argued that proficient 21st century readers and writers should be able to adroitly “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts” (NCTE, 2011, para. 1). Several notable pedagogues and scholars have taken NCTE’s position statement and fashioned similar arguments. In all the discussion, though, of what it means to be a writer in the 21st century, little has been said about how multimodal composition (e.g., texts that use a combination of multiple modes such as alphabetic text, images, and sound) affects students’ perceptions of writing and, to that extent, whether students even view multimodal composition as writing. This article looks to respond to this perceived gap in scholarship. Specifically, we offer the results of an empirical research project conducted at Brick University; this study examines how two first year writing classrooms responded to multimodal composition projects, paying particular attention to how these projects influenced student perception of writing and, similarly, how multimodal composition impacted their writing skills.

Introduction

Today, the ways we define literacy and engage in literacy instruction have become exponentially more complex. Multimodal composition is pervasive in our lives, as we are continually assuaged by texts that juxtapose any combination of image, text, and audio together. Given the changing tenor of what it means to produce and consume text, this naturally also challenges traditional composition instruction, including approaches to and understanding of the rhetorical situation. As a result, scholars continue to argue for the inclusion of multimodal reading and writing as valued components of composition instruction (see Bowen &

Whithaus, 2013; Lutkewitte, 2013; Morrison, 2011; Selfe, 2007; Wysocki, 2004). In all the discussion, though, of what it means to be a writer in the 21st century, little has been said about how multimodal composition affects students’ perceptions of writing and, to that extent, whether students even view multimodal composition as writing. These kinds of questions are extremely important, as the issue of student-constructed writing identities (i.e., whether a student sees him/herself as a “good” or “bad” writer) has had a long tradition in composition scholarship (see Ivanic, 1998; Brandt, 1998; & Foucault, 1997).

This article looks to respond to this perceived gap in scholarship. Specifically, we

offer the results of an empirical research project conducted at Brick University; this study examines how two first year writing classrooms responded to multimodal composition projects, paying particular attention to how these projects influenced student perception of writing and, similarly, how the multimodal projects helped further their abilities as student writers. Our project is shaped by survey data, interview data, and of course, published scholarship; as a result, we use constructivist grounded theory to theorize how students perceive multimodal composition in the first-year writing classroom. We close our article with suggestions for how to frame multimodal composition projects in writing classrooms to ensure that composing such texts positively impacts students.

Review of Literature

There is no shortage of calls for composition stakeholders (e.g., writing instructors, administrators, and so forth) to embrace multimodal composition—and many of these calls make increasingly compelling arguments. While this review of literature does not claim to include all of these impressive calls—such a task would prove unwieldy and, quite possibly, redundant—we do aim to briefly summarize some of the arguments that convinced us to pay attention to multimodal composition. Yancey (2004) (then the head editor of *College Composition and Communication*) challenged those in the field of composition to recognize the tectonic shift in how we define writing by demonstrating that writing is no longer only putting words on a page. A few years later, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) put forth the argument that proficient 21st century readers and writers should be able to adroitly “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts” (2011, para. 1). Though these quotations certainly carry some power, the real impact stems from who said them. Consider: CCC and NCTE

are two of most well respected bodies and voices in the composition studies. They have, for the better part of their existences, been devoted to the written, alphabetic, printed word. For these two organizations to argue for a shift in how we ought to perceive writing and literacy is noteworthy. Given the influence that Yancey (and CCC) and NCTE have, it is not surprising that the last decade has seen an expansion of multimodal composition scholarship in almost all major composition journals and conferences (including the 2010 and 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Spring 2015 issue of *Composition Studies*, the 2011-2012 issue of *Basic Writing e-journal*, and many others).

This boom of scholarship has seen several notable pedagogues and scholars extending the premise of Yancey and NCTE’s argument for “new writing,” now more commonly referred to as “multimodal composition.” For example, Snyder and Bulfin (2008) believed that literate individuals must now recognize the ways in which “different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning. These other modes incorporate diagrams, pictures, video, gesture, speech, and sound. In an increasingly multimodal communication landscape, understandings of language are no longer limited to grammar, lexicon, and semantics” (Snyder & Bulfin, 2008, p. 809). Here, the authors articulated the various modes that writers should become well versed in and clearly, these modes extend much further than the written word. Lovett, Purdy, Gossett, Lamanna, and Squier (2010) continued this line of thought by asserting that “we live in a world that has moved well beyond the technology of ink and paper; a world in which, increasingly, words come off the page” (p. 288); similarly, Serafini (2014) suggested that students need to be able to effectively communicate in a world that has grown increasingly multimodal. These authors suggested that writers must now become increasingly familiar with “nonprint-centric, multimodal texts” (Lovett et al., 2010, p. 288).

Wysocki (2003) took this notion one step further, by claiming “to be responsible teachers, we need to help our students...learn how different choices in visual arrangement (on screen and off) encourage different kinds of meaning making and encourage us to take up (overtly or not) various values” (p. 186). Simply put, what it means to be a writer in the classroom, a writer in the community, and/or a teacher of writing is evolving, as a writer/teacher of writing in the 21st century needs to be aware of multiple modes of communication and, perhaps more importantly, be able to communicate using these multiple modes. Likewise, Selfe (2004) maintained that “if our profession continues to focus solely on teaching only alphabetic composition...we run the risk of making composition studies increasingly irrelevant to students engaging in contemporary practices of communicating” (p. 72). As such, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) argued for a pedagogy of multiliteracies, echoing a call made by the New London Group (1996) over a decade earlier. They articulated a pedagogy of multiliteracies as viewing all forms and modes of communication not as methods of reproducing information, but rather as dynamically creating and transforming information. Though the information presented here offers an incomplete mosaic of the arguments for the inclusion of multimodal composition in writing curricula—other convincing arguments include Kress (2003), New London Group (1996), and Palmeri (2012), among others—the aforementioned scholars and pedagogues paint a clear picture: multimodal composition is part of the present and future for composition studies and should be complementary to traditional writing projects—in both the classroom and scholarship.

Not surprisingly, given the number and persuasiveness of the arguments for multimodal composition, there has been increasing attention given to ideas for including multimodal composition in writing curricula. After all, as Jewitt (2008) notes, “A

key aspect of this [remediation] is the reconfiguration of the representational and communicational resources of image, action, sound, and so on in new multimodal ensembles” (p. 241). For example, a number of scholars encourage instructors to turn the ever-popular literacy narrative assignment into a multimodal project. Kittle (2009) had students create digital documents of their literacy narratives. He encouraged students to include web 2.0 technologies because he saw how widespread they had become in other college curricula and in the nebulous workplace. Similarly, Frost, Myatt, and Smith (2009) took inspiration from the aforementioned Yancey piece on rethinking composition in the digital era—along with the “realization” that students are, on a daily basis, using a vast amount of “semiotic resources”—to integrate multimodal assignments, such as the hybrid essay (images used in alphabetic essays), into their courses. Like Kittle, these authors chose to use this in a literacy narrative assignment. Integrating multimodal assignments, they argued, helps stop individuals from privileging the printed word while it also helps students learn a variety of communicative methods (Frost et al., 2009). Literacy narratives are obviously not the only project ripe for multimodal composition projects. George (2002) also had her students work with images by assigning a visual argument composition. She purposefully kept this assignment open-ended, as she hoped students would take advantage of the freedom to explore different design ideas. This also allowed the students to make some very important and real rhetorical decisions about which modes/media to use. It is important to consider how to include multimodal compositions in the classroom because as Lankshear and Knobel (2003) note, it is important instructors are responsible literacy sponsors by paying attention to the practices students use away from the classroom; as students are interacting with multimodal compositions on a daily basis in their private lives—often

without even realizing it—educators should make a conscious effort to design relevant literacy instruction. Other ideas on how to responsibly do this—that is, integrate multimodal composition projects in writing courses—are found in edited collections devoted to that very subject, such as *Multimodal Composition* (2007), *Reading and Writing New Media* (2010), and *Teaching the New Writing* (2009).

Additionally, scholars are just as concerned about how multimodal composition shouldn't be presented. In an interview, Cheryl Ball noted that too often teachers include multimodal composition because they think the students will have “fun” doing something different. She stated, [Instructors] think ‘Oh, the students will be more engaged, and multimodal projects are more fun to read’...But what gets overlooked in that is that the teachers aren't often structuring the assignments in a way that makes them manageable for students, and they're often done as an add-on to the regular written assignments. (Mahon, 2013, p. 116)

Authors from the edited collection *Multimodal Composition* (Selfe, 2007) also demonstrated the importance of treating multimodal composition as a core assignment—not just an add-on. Branscum and Toscano (2007) noted that instructors should provide “enough time for students and teachers to learn how to use digital equipment, view and discuss a range of multimodal projects that might encourage creative responses, collaborate on solving problems, and practice and experiment with video- and audio-editing techniques” (p. 90). This kind of in-depth learning cannot be accomplished in one or two weeks, which often is the fate of the multimodal composition assignment in writing courses (Mahon, 2013). Indeed, Appendix Four in *Multimodal Composition* reveals a sample timeline for a proposed multimodal composition assignment that encompasses eleven weeks of the semester (Selfe, 2007).

This implies that multimodal composition, while “fun,” is also a time-consuming endeavor that demands attention to detail, purpose, effectiveness, and so forth.

The discourse outlined above is essential to the growth of multimodal composition. The calls for multimodal composition units to be fully integrated into writing programs are useful for writing program administrators looking to persuade other stakeholders (e.g., other composition instructors, English instructors, Deans, librarians, and so forth) to get on board with the evolution of composition and writing. Likewise, instructors new to multimodal composition can lean heavily on the project and pedagogical ideas outlined above as they look for ways to responsibly address multiliteracies in their writing classroom, perhaps for the first time.

We hope that our research adds to this fine scholarship in a meaningful way. Specifically, we believe that while the literature reveals powerful arguments for the inclusion of multimodal composition in writing curricula, there is currently not enough scholarship that examines how students respond to multimodal composition. Furthermore, the available literature lacks the inclusion of student voice, something vital to fully understanding how multimodal composition might be utilized and how it might best be implemented. Put differently, we are interested in better understanding how multimodal composition impacts a students' perception of writing—how does (or can) multimodal composition help students grow as writers? How can the lessons learned from multimodal composition be applied to a range of composition types (e.g., traditional, multimodal, and so forth)? Answers to these questions can help us begin to transform traditional writing courses to better parallel contemporary notions of literacy by more effectively implementing multimodal composition experiences into our courses.

Methods and Methodology

We used two methods for collecting data: surveys and interviews. We chose survey research in part because Lauer and Asher (1988) noted that this kind of research can be valuable in allowing the researcher to describe a large(n) group of people in terms of a sample. As we were looking to get a feel for attitudes among a particular population, we needed a quick way to access and ask questions—and survey research allows for this. Similarly, we used interviews as a way to get more detailed responses from a smaller population and to include and value student voices in the research process.

Survey Instrument

We used an adapted version of the Bottomley, Henk and Melnick (1997) survey to assess students' views of themselves as writers, where alpha reliabilities ranged from .88 to .95. The Writer Self-Perception Scale is a 38 item instrument designed for young writers, which we adapted to assess college-level writers. Scoring was done on a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). When adapting the survey, we made minimal changes. The Bottomley et al. survey uses language specifically related to children; thus, we rephrased items to (1) better represent the writing community the freshmen writers establish throughout the course (e.g., we replaced the words “kids” and “classmates” with the word “peers”) and (2) better represent the age of our participants (e.g., we rephrased the original item “I like how writing makes me feel inside” to read “I like how writing makes me feel”). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the adapted scale used in this study was $\alpha=0.973$.

We administered the survey as a pre- and post-test. Participating students completed the pre-test at the beginning of the semester, during the first week of class. Likewise, they completed the post-test during the final week of class. Surveys were filled out electronically, and the data were populated into spreadsheets and matched (pre- and post-) by participant. A

paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare students' perceptions of themselves as writers before and after participating in a writing course with heavy emphasis on multimodal composition. Additionally, we analyzed data by individual student in an effort to tease out where specific differences occurred and to add another layer to our interpretation and understanding.

Interviews

We also interviewed three individuals three times during the semester; these individuals had indicated a willingness on the initial survey to participate further in our study. Two participants were students in one researcher's class, and one was a student in the other researcher's class. These interviews were conducted at the beginning of the semester, during the middle of the semester, and at the end of the semester. Additionally, these three students gave their consent for us to use and analyze the writing they composed over the course the semester. We used pseudonyms for all the student participants.

Charmaz (2006) noted that interviewing is useful to a qualitative researcher because it allows “in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and as such, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry” (p. 25). In order to facilitate this in-depth exploration, we constructed open-ended questions that were designed to invite detailed discussion on a particular topic (see Appendix A). In crafting the research questions, we utilized a two-level process, where both researchers reviewed and revised question drafts and then met together to review and make final revisions as a team prior to interview administration. Indeed, we took the advice of Charmaz, who reminded researchers that “Interviewers use in-depth interviewing to explore, not to interrogate” (p. 29, emphasis ours). More specifically, we surveyed and interviewed the participants of two different sections of Critical Writing, Reading, and Research II in the Spring of 2015 at Brick University (a pseudonym).

Method of Analysis

To analyze the data—surveys, interviews, and of course published scholarship—we used Charmaz’s (2006) notion of Constructivist Grounded Theory. Charmaz noted that since the original advocacy of Grounded Theory, there have been many permutations of it. As she noted, grounded theory is a “set of principles and practices, not...prescriptions or packages. [It] emphasizes flexible guidelines, not methodological rules, recipes and requirements” (p. 9). Charmaz herself advocated a variation of Grounded Theory, which she termed “Constructed Grounded Theory.” She wrote,

I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it. (p. 10, emphasis original)

It is this framework of Grounded Theory that we use in this study. We follow the kind of Grounded Theory Charmaz proposed; this includes gathering rich and full data and placing said data in their situational contexts (using the methods outlined above), coding our data, writing extended notes (including analysis) about our data (memo-writing), and finally, constructing a kind of working theory that reflects our data analysis. The analysis that we provide here, then, reflects both our survey and interview findings. The dominant codes we uncovered when working through the interview data are represented in our three subheadings found in the analysis section.

Site Description

We conducted our study at Brick University—a small, private four-year university nestled in the heart of the Midwest; it should be noted that both authors were

currently working at Brick University during the time of this study. As do many private universities, Brick University identifies itself as a liberal arts institution. Furthermore, like most colleges or universities they value and strive to instill a student-centered environment, while encouraging faculty members to explore creative and innovative pedagogies. Additionally, Brick University administrators encourage faculty members to integrate “performance based learning initiatives”—projects that hold some kind of application beyond the confines of the classroom walls. Unlike some private institutions, though, students with low ACT scores are encouraged to apply, and many of the students are individuals who struggled in high school.

Brick University has a two-course first year writing sequence; the first is designed to introduce students to multi-draft process writing and the second is designed to expand students’ research abilities. These writing skills are further developed through “writing intensive courses”—a block of three, interdisciplinary courses taken during the students’ sophomore and junior years that have a variety of themes. There is a wide range of approaches to first year writing and, similarly, to the writing intensive courses that follow; projects and lessons vary depending on the instructor. Aside from the almost obligatory PowerPoint presentation that takes place at the end of the semester, there are not many instances of multimodal composition being actively taught in this sequence. Part of this is due to programmatic assessment. That is, in the first year writing sequence, instructors are required to collect three written artifacts: a reflection in the first course, and a reading response and a research essay in the second course. As of now, it is required that all submitted artifacts conform to the traditional, alphabetic essay format. As instructors of first-year writing at Brick University, we sought to change status quo and conform to the best practices of composition instruction, as outlined in the

literature review; this meant integrating multimodal composition into our writing instruction. In some ways, though, the artifact collection proved to be a limitation when crafting multimodal assignments—it meant that the research project still had to be driven by (mostly) alphabetic text, while ensuring students could not make use of video and audio. That is, because our repository for collecting artifacts only accepts alphabetic text, we could not assign something like a researched documentary.

We implemented multimodal composition as an integral part of the class, not simply as an add-on, supplementary assignment. Specifically, the authors asked students to simultaneously create a website (using Weebly.com) on the same topic as their research paper. This allowed students a couple of options: one, they could remediate their essay by converting it into a website; and two, they could opt to completely restructure their research project and design a way to share their information in completely unique ways (i.e., those disparate to the traditional essay). As an important component of the class, students received ongoing instruction related to multimodal composition: visual rhetoric, writing for a web audience, reading web text, and so forth. We scaffolded such instruction through informal class discussion (how do websites appeal to you?), websites as models and mentor texts (analyzing what has been done well and what has not), and formal assignments (a rhetorical analysis of a website). Moreover, students participated in in-class workshop sessions, where they received feedback from their peers and their instructors on their on-going website design.

Additionally, we gave students the opportunity to explore website design with an annotated bibliography blog assignment; here, students designed their own Wordpress blog, which they turned into a research log. Though a graded assignment, it was a scaffold to introduce students to writing for the web and web design. Our ultimate goal was to treat multimodal composition in the same way we

would traditional reading and writing instruction—by valuing it enough to provide equal time (instruction, practice, feedback, and process) in class and in workload. In other words, our courses were not taught like traditional writing courses, with multimodal projects embedded; rather, they were taught as composition courses, where all forms of writing and communication were valued equally.

Subject Background

Amy is a freshman student at Brick University. She entered the Spring semester as an undecided major, but by the end of the semester decided to pursue chemistry. As we will discuss later, Amy indicated several times during the interviews that she did not care for writing. Despite this, Amy worked hard throughout the semester, and strove to come up with a topic of interest to her for the research project. Amy's project focused on the campaigning strategies of three hopeful Republican presidential candidates for the 2016 election: Jeb Bush, Dr. Ben Carson, and Ted Cruz. Her research essay proceeded to make the argument that Dr. Carson's political strategy was the most effective. Her website took a similar tact: she outlined the strategies for all three candidates, but then through the use of videos, tried to argue that Carson's approach would garner the most votes and appeal more favorably to Republicans.

Hank is a freshman music business major. He is a non-traditional student in that he took a year off from school following his high school graduation. Moreover, it is of note that he only planned to stay at Brick University for one academic year; following the close of the semester, Hank was intending to transfer to a public university due to the financial strain of attending the private liberal arts college. Regardless of an impending transfer, Hank openly expressed interest in the course and excitement about the opportunity to compose in non-traditional ways. As part of his research project, Hank conducted a critical analysis of sexism in western comedy. He used two comedians, Iliza Shlesinger and

Andrew Dice Clay, to examine uses of conservative and subversive humor. Hank's website became a remediation of his essay in that the information shared was quite similar; the difference, though, was found in his use of images and videos to more effectively appeal to a much broader audience. In essence, he used the additional modes and media available to him to make his research visible to a general audience.

Faye is a freshman chemistry major. Interestingly, Faye is the only research participant to know their instructor before the start of the semester, having taken an earlier writing course with one of the authors. Faye admits to enjoying writing, though she confided that she historically has had a hard time writing long essays. Faye's research project was unique in that she wanted to focus explicitly on paranormal films. She had some difficulty crafting an argument on this topic, before finally settling on why people are attracted to paranormal films and how Hollywood makes them more attractive. Although her website ended up taking a wildly different approach, as she focused specifically on paranormal films that she believed distorted the truth of specific paranormal events. She did this through filmic case studies of *The Conjuring* and *The Blair Witch Project*.

Findings

Survey Instrument

There was a significant difference in students' pre-survey ($M=3.279$, $SD=0.999$) and post-survey ($M=3.470$, $SD=1.023$) responses on the Writer Self-Perception Scale; $t(15)=4.21$, $p<.001$. In other words, on average students' post-survey responses were significantly higher than pre-survey responses, suggesting a positive change in their self-perception as writers. Additionally, a supplemental analysis of the data found that 11 of 16 students demonstrated significant changes in their survey responses. Eight students' scores changed positively, and

interestingly, three students' scores decreased (see Table 1). This disparity could be due to a number of student variables, such as (1) being more comfortable producing traditional text, (2) having more experience interacting with traditional text, (3) seeing multimodal composition as a risk, and/or (4) being intimidated by the demands of multimodal composition.

Students were asked two additional items on the post-survey (Engaging in multimodal composition throughout the semester has made me a better writer; Engaging in multimodal writing throughout the semester has changed my perception of writing for the better) to assess their perceptions of how their experiences engaging in multimodal composition throughout the semester impacted their writerly identity (i.e., their self-perception as writers). Means of 3.875 and 4.0 respectively suggest students, on average, agreed that engaging in multimodal composition as part of their freshman writing course (a) made them better writers and (b) positively changed their perceptions of writing.

Interviews

Our survey data indicate two major findings: that multimodal composition made students feel like better writers and that in some fashion, multimodal composition positively impacted their perception of writing. The interviews yielded some insight into what role multimodal composition played in both of these areas. Though these are just three students of sixteen, it gives us a snapshot of how multimodal composition impacted both student writing and students' perception of writing.

Audience awareness. There is no denying that audience awareness is one of the pillars of first year writing instruction; as a key component of the rhetorical situation, audience awareness is as synonymous with first year writing as thesis statements, transitions, and paragraph development.

Table 1

Results of paired sample t-tests comparing changes in self-perception by individual student

Student	Pre-score Mean/SD	Post-score Mean/SD	t-test
Student 1	M=3.236 SD=0.786	M=3.578 SD=0.758	t (37) = 2.97, p = .005
Student 2*	M=3.162 SD=0.945	M=2.810 SD=0.945	t (37) = 2.59, p = .01
Student 3	M=3.789 SD=0.474	M=4.236 SD=0.714	t (37) = 4.36, p < .001
Student 4	M=3.842 SD=0.855	M=5.0 SD=0	t (37) = 8.15, p < .001
Student 5	M=3.631 SD=0.674	M=3.973 SD=0.677	t (37) = 3.97, p < .001
Student 6	M=2.268 SD=0.589	M=3.736 SD=0.554	t (37) = 3.37, p = .001
Student 7	M=2.184 SD=0.766	M=2.526 SD=0.861	t (37) = 3.63, p < .001
Student 8*	M=3.368 SD=0.750	M=2.552 SD=0.860	t (37) = 5.67, p < .001
Student 9*	M=4.184 SD=0.766	M=3.657 SD=0.745	t (37) = 4.54, p < .001
Student 10	M=3.0 SD=0.869	M=4.026 SD=0.853	t (37) = 7.28, p < .001
Student 11	M=1.289 SD=0.459	M=1.947 SD=0.566	t (37) = 8.15, p < .001

*Student significant change was negative

Critics of multimodal composition suggest that multimodal projects will actually detract from this important instruction central to a students' writing success. While we believe the opposite to be true, we are not the only ones with this viewpoint. For example, Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) noted that one of the many benefits of assigning multimodal projects is that it can heighten the importance of audience awareness. They asserted that audience—among other tenets of rhetorical principles in communication—may “be more difficult to ignore in audio and video compositions” and that “the study of literacy and composing using a full range of visual and aural modalities can teach students new strategies and approaches” for addressing the rhetorical situation—which of course includes

audience (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 5). Similarly, Alexander, Powell, and Green (2012) noted that one of the benefits to assigning multimodal composition is that it highlights how each modal affordance has certain benefits and limitations. For instance, they gave the example that the visual affordance allowed the composer to “show” meaning to an audience. What informs this discussion, though, is that it is incumbent upon the composer to determine which modal affordance—complete with its strengths and limitations—will best reach their audience.

Not surprisingly, then, part of our goal in assigning the multimodal composition project was to help students better understand exactly what the aforementioned scholars have discussed: how specific audiences can and

should dictate what communicative modes an individual uses to craft a text. Though audience awareness is preached in every composition classroom—rightly so—and can be effectively taught through the use of strictly alphabetic composition, multimodal composition affords the instructor yet another way to reinforce the importance of audience awareness.

Because we only assigned one explicitly multimodal composition—the Weebly website creation (weebly.com)—we felt the best way to show students the value and importance of audience awareness was to remediate their traditional, ten page research essay. It is of note, though, that we encouraged students to turn their “traditional” research essays into hybrid essays that combined image and text. The Weebly website creation demanded students translate a pre-existing text written for one specific audience (an academic one) into a distinctly different audience (a public audience with generic interest in their topic). As mentioned earlier, we had several activities designed to help students understand the value of audience awareness in composition. We began the semester with a rhetorical analysis of a website, and therefore, we did several practice analyses of websites as a large group in class. To that end, we assigned readings on writing for the web, including “Writing in the Genres of the Web” from *Writing Spaces* (Barton, Kalmbach, & Lowe, 2011), the New Media articles from *Writing Commons* (e.g., Branham & Farrar, n.d.; Moxley, n.d.), among others, which helped the students see guidelines for designing and writing webpages. After this instruction and the subsequent production of their website, it was interesting to see how students continued their education regarding the importance of audience through this project.

In both her interviews and written reflection, Faye suggested that she learned a lot about the importance of audience through the Weebly website creation project. Interestingly, she found that audience most

directly affected her word choice; as a result, the multimodal composition project did not necessarily show her how images can be valuable, but rather how alphabetic text can be used differently for different audiences. Though this had been discussed in other classes, she saw it firsthand when writing for the web. She noted that “The writing on the website was more blunt and to the point...because people online, they don’t want to take the time to just sit there and read. They want the facts. They want it now.” Because of this, she strove to use “common, everyday language. Short, sweet, and to the point.” Guiding all of her diction choices was the idea that she was writing for the “average person.” She strove to write her sentences at a level that a person with a fifth grade education could understand. This differed from her research essay, which was geared more specifically to film scholars and as such, used film studies jargon. Here, she shows her ability to differentiate what audiences will expect given the specific text type; in this regard, exposing Faye to multiple text types—that is, traditional text (such as her research essay, along with traditional scholarly articles) and multimodal texts—helped her better make these observations.

Hank was also inspired to shape his website through what he perceived his audience would like. For him, this meant departing from the written word almost entirely. As he was planning his website, he anticipated he would rely heavily on video clips of comedians and old comic strips that demonstrated sexism in comedy, as this is what he connected with when he analyzed websites dealing with humor, such as *Funny or Die* and *The Onion*. Hank drew from large group in-class analysis of websites, coupled with peer analysis, to conclude that videos on a website makes the text “more interesting. Making it interesting is important, I think.” Amy offered a similar idea: “I chose to use videos and pictures [for my website] because the audience that visits websites are interested in things they can look at or watch rather than

reading a lot of information.” Here, Amy shows a little more nuance than Hank but they both highlight the same point: people interacting with websites may not appreciate heavy alphabetic text. It is important, then, to find other media that can still convey their main points without alienating their readers. So while Faye was concerned with the audience’s ability to understand her research through the written text, Hank and Amy were more concerned with engaging the audience and holding their interest through the use of what they believed was more accessible communicative modes.

It would seem, then, that the website creation project helped these three students better understand the importance of audience in the role of composition. Though Faye saw the website project as a way to re-conceive her alphabetic text, both Hank and Amy saw the website project as an opportunity to use other modes to (hopefully) connect with their audience; put differently, they saw the benefits of using videos and images—“exciting,” engaging modes that can show their argument—to complement their written text. We saw through this study that, multimodal composition allowed our students new ways to think about connecting with audiences. They thought about what audiences expect and actively worked to find ways to use different modes to meet those expectations. Audience awareness is an important concept to teach in all composition classrooms, regardless of age or level. Our findings suggest that multimodal composition might be yet another tool to help all students consider and connect with audiences in ways previously not considered.

Design. According to Hess (2007), “One of the most important reasons to design assignments for multimodal composition is to expand students’ thinking about composing and how this complex set of processes works” (p. 29). Similarly, Carpenter (2014) suggested that the complexity of multimodal composition requires unique and individual approaches to designing (1) texts themselves

and (2) multimodal experiences. Additionally, Kist (2005) noted that students need to be comfortable reading and writing in any medium, suggesting that having an understanding of how multiple texts work is essential for success. In discussing multiliteracies and pedagogy, the New London Group (1996) argued that design is important in the multimodal composition process and that learners should be immersed into communities of practice, where design processes are developed. The scholarship on multimodal composition suggests that, in theory, multimodal projects should help students better understand how to use “all available means” (Hess, 2007, p. 30) to compose a wide array of rhetorically effective texts; that is, students should be able to better understand multiple modes of communication to design effective, persuasive, and powerful texts. As a result, a major goal of our course was to provide students opportunities to toy with the processes and choice associated with composition design, including considering the affordances and uses of multiple modes of communication.

While in the previous section we showed how multimodal composition helped students better understand audience, their increased audience awareness also helped them develop a better understanding of document design. Specifically, they began to think about how a text could be designed in ways that they previously had not considered. For instance, when working on her website, Faye noted that she needed to “figure out which pictures fit perfectly with the theme and my tone and dialect and all that.” Here, Faye showed that she understands that certain topics mandate certain tones and that pictures can help emphasize the tone she is trying to establish for her theme/topic. Interestingly, Faye also pointed out that writing is more than just words. She said, “[writing] was more than just the words; it was also like, what colors are you using? . . . The biggest thing I didn’t know was the colors . . . like how big colors and picture choices can hugely affect [your text]. I didn’t

realize until this semester how important it actually is.” Thus, we can see that Faye is starting to understand the role design can play in achieving purpose and, to some extent, reaching out to a specific audience. Indeed, Faye noted that when she has the opportunity to do other multimodal projects, such as PowerPoint presentations, she will approach them differently. She said, “I’m not going to slap on whichever one [PowerPoint theme] I think is pretty. I’m gonna put the one on there that fits my topic the most...I used to just look through and put my paper, copy and paste it and just slap it on there [the PowerPoint slide].”

Amy offered similar insights. She thought that the website creation project offered a bit more flexibility when it came to design. That is, the website afforded her a bit more creative freedom than traditional essays. Specifically, she appreciated the opportunity to integrate videos on her website. Since her website is dedicated to showing the strength of Dr. Carson as a candidate, she liked the idea of including multiple videos of Carson speaking; this allowed her viewers to hear Carson speak rather than reading direct quotes that she used in her essay. She found the power of aurality would help make her argument stronger more than the alphabetic transcript of those words. Moreover, given her topic, she wanted to design her website to look as patriotic as possible; as such, she made design choices to emphasize that theme. She chose to use “a red, white, and blue color theme, as well as the American flag background, as this is a political topic. I thought that this made sense because potential candidates are always shown with the American flag and being patriotic.” Here, we can see Amy making some very strong design choices to emphasize her purpose.

What our students are discussing here is an excellent example of Selber’s (2004) concept of rhetorical literacy. Selber noted that it is important for teachers to frame multimodal (digital) creation “as a rhetorical activity, one that includes persuasion,

deliberation, reflection, social action, and an ability to analyze metaphors” (p. 182).

However, Selber also noted that rhetorical literacy instruction cannot be realized without addressing functional literacy instruction as well. Selber succinctly described the functionally literate student as “[understanding] what computers are generally good at, using advanced software features that are often ignored, and customizing interfaces” (p. 46). Functional literacy, then, encompasses anything from working within Microsoft Word to customizing a desktop/laptop layout to something as “simple” as naming files.

There is a tendency to overlook functional literacy in multimodal composition instruction: some find it too reductive, others believe that it gets in the way of teaching rhetorical literacy, and others believe that our students already “know” how to use computers and a myriad of digital tools (usually citing Prensky’s (2001) belief that 21st century students are digital natives who know more about computers than their instructors). Yet DeVoss (2002) wrote that there is a danger in assuming that students just “know” how to use computers, noting that some students have not had access to technology in their home or high school. As we scaffolded our multimodal projects, we taught functional literacy several times throughout the semester. We first invited students to understand how word and image interacted together by assigning a hybrid essay. Therefore, we needed to introduce and teach students how to actually seamlessly integrate images into Microsoft Word so they could best produce a document that uses images effectively. They could not do this without knowing how to place images into a document, move the images where they want, and how to wrap the alphabetic text around the image. And indeed, our students suggest that functional computer literacy instruction—in this case, education on how to insert images in word documents and how to use Weebly—was vital for their success.

Faye noted that learning how to properly integrate images using Microsoft Word proved to be invaluable instruction: “I thought I knew Word through and through, but then there was the wrap text thing and the picture, and then I was just like my mind was blown.” She went on to note it’s “obnoxious” having images move every which way in the word document. To that end, she was pleased to note that this semester helped her learn how to format. Before, she used to just put the image in the “center and be like, done.” By learning how to use wrap-text features in MS Word, she was able to place the image where she wanted to and create a more rhetorically savvy document.

Clearly, then, we can see that our students learned how to think more rhetorically about their document design; working on the Weebly website project helped them to understand the roles of different modes when designing documents. Moreover, it helped our students think about where to place images in a text to be the most effective. Yet, our students also suggest that this rhetorical savvy would not be possible without at least some nominal functional literacy instruction. It could be possible to say that multimodal composition helps students think about designing documents in new ways, but that in order to see that theory put into practice, some time needs to be spent showing students how to functionally use the tools needed to create the texts (multimodal or otherwise). Therefore, when instructors are thinking of integrating this kind of product, they should budget their time to account for both functional and rhetorical literacy instruction, as writers of all levels may need assistance transitioning between traditional notions of writing, which is still important, and multimodal projects.

Perception. Our first two sections discussed how multimodal composition helped our students feel like stronger writers, paying particular attention to how the Weebly project helped students better understand audience awareness and also the role design

plays in writing. Our last section turns our attention to how multimodal composition impacted our students’ perception of writing. Interestingly, our three students offered three very different insights.

At the beginning of the semester, Hank stressed that he believed writing was more than “Times New Roman 12.” For instance, he believed that one could write with sound; he admitted that part of his expanded viewpoint on writing was because of his music background. As a song-writer—something he did outside of the confines of the classroom—he was constantly looking for sound combinations that worked well with a string of words. Furthermore, Hank was quite familiar with multimodal composition in an academic setting; he noted that “We were doing that stuff [multimodal composition] in high school.”

Given this, perhaps it is not surprising that Hank didn’t think that multimodal composition impacted his perception of writing much. During our in-class discussions of both individual modes and the combination used to compose websites, Hank was adroit at analyzing the rhetorical appeals and effectiveness of a variety of modes, including images, color and so forth. As such, whether he included these types of compositions in his own definition of writing, he was clearly able to consider the affordances of modalities with regard to communication. Reflecting back on his experiences working on the Website, Hank said that “I really enjoyed working with the website. It was really fun, really innovative.” When pressed to describe what was “fun” about the project, Hank offered this: “I’m good at it.” At first blush, it would seem that Hank enjoyed the multimodal projects, but not because they expanded his understanding of what it means to be a writer but rather because he was familiar with this kind of composing and found it “easy.” Yet through conversations with Hank, it became apparent that multimodal composition impacted his perception of writing in one key way: writing

didn't have to always be "long." He noted "When you insert pictures, when you insert graphs, measurement studies, uh, tables, it covers a lot more ground than a whole paragraph. I mean, you can write two pages but compress that into one image. You can describe a lot without text." Despite his confessed familiarity with writing, Hank equated "writing" to the traditional research essay—a kind of writing, he admitted, that "scares me." More importantly, Hank realized that not only can images condense an essay (perhaps making it less daunting to tackle), but it can also enhance and supplement the written word. While we as researchers can see Hank doing different things with writing and growing as a writer, we can't escape the fact that Hank himself found that multimodal composition, though he saw it as fun, did not change his perception of writing.

Amy disliked writing from the onset of the class—and that was a mindset that did not change. She told us at the beginning of the semester, "I just don't like it, and I don't know, I'm more of a math person. I'd rather write like numbers and stuff." As the semester progressed, she noted that she found writing to be too subjective: "[In] math and science the answer is more defined. And then like in writing, especially like essays and papers, it's really like up to the reader, whoever's grading it." It became clear that like many students, Amy sought a formula for writing; as she learned throughout the semester that no such formula exists, her frustrations with writing grew.

Despite her distaste for writing, she did note that multimodal composition impacted her in powerful ways. She speculated that multimodal composition projects might be more convincing when trying to craft an argument. Amy suggested if "the opposing side" simply "read" an article, the readers "think, this is dumb...I don't agree with this" and stop reading it. However, in a multimodal composition piece, she thought that it helped the argument "come to life" and thus made more difficult for someone to turn away. She

sees multimodal composition as a way to make writing more persuasive; that said, it is also important to realize that she draws very clear demarcations between "multimodal composition" and "traditional writing." That said, it was encouraging that Amy was still able to discern how multimodal composition can impact her traditional writing projects; this can be tough for some first year writers, especially when they see the text types as so distinct from one another.

Faye exhibited the most enthusiasm and the most explicit change out of the three participants. Despite seeing herself as a strong writer at the beginning of the semester, she was clearly impacted by the multimodal composition projects. For one, she indicated that she wouldn't have previously seen a "website as a form of writing." But perhaps more importantly, the multimodal projects helped her see that "there is more to just the formal research paper or formal paper to writing...you talk differently online or in person, like face to face than you would in a paper." She continued that a person needs to be able to communicate effectively "in all forms." Because of this, she seemed thankful to have the opportunity to try designing a website. She indicated that she feels "more confident now as a writer. I feel like I can...now that I went through this, I can effectively write for all different types of platforms." For Faye, multimodal composition not only helped her expand her idea of what writing is, but it also helped her become more confident as a writer, because she feels more prepared to write in a variety of situations using a variety of different "platforms."

Our student voices mirror some of the benefits that Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) articulated for multimodal composition. They wrote that for students, multimodal composition projects can be refreshing (because it's different from the many other composing instruction experience they've had), meaningful (because the production of multimodal

texts in class resemble many of the real-life texts students encounter in digital spaces) and relevant (students often sense that multimodal approaches to composing will matter in their lives outside the classroom). (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 4)

While composition instructors need to be careful to not assign multimodal composition projects simply because they're fun, Takayoshi and Selfe do raise a valuable point: it is important to provide students with engaging, meaningful, and relevant projects. For Hank, the multimodal composition projects were engaging, allowing him to compose in a manner that was familiar to him. For Faye, the multimodal composition projects were both meaningful and relevant, as she saw how this kind of writing could benefit her in future situations. Even Amy might be able to say that multimodal composition was meaningful, as she noted that it was a persuasive text-type. Thus, even though our students may not have the vocabulary to always clearly articulate how multimodal composition impacted their perception of writing, we can see multimodal composition impacting students in a manner that mirrors Takayoshi and Selfe's three main points: multimodal composition is engaging, meaningful, and relevant. Given our findings, we are confident that even the most reluctant writers engaging with multimodal composition projects will be able to make powerful and relevant connections with their work.

Conclusion

We began this project with the hope that hearing from our students about how multimodal composition impacts their perception and understanding of writing could contribute to the scholarship on multimodal literacies in meaningful ways. Furthermore, we wanted to acknowledge and include student voice in this discussion, helping us to better hear what those student voices were telling us about their own

experiences with multimodal composition and how it impacted their understandings and uses of writing. Parallel to the literature, we found that introducing students to well-planned and scaffolded multimodal composition activities, especially when they are valued equally with traditional writing, allows students to begin thinking differently about writing and the ever-broadening notion of literacy.

Our study suggests that students not only find multimodal projects to be engaging, meaningful, and relevant, but also that multimodal composition helps students have a stronger understanding of writing as a whole. Specifically, our survey data indicates that the majority of students believed that multimodal composition improved their writing and that multimodal composition improved their perception of writing. Our interviews suggest that multimodal composition helped students better understand the role of audience in composition; additionally, multimodal composition helped our students better understand the role design plays in crafting a text. Finally, engaging in multimodal composition affected students' perceptions of writing. Each of these are important aspects of writing (whether it be multimodal or otherwise). However, we also acknowledge that this is a starting point; future studies endeavoring to capture the student perspective could continue to help instructors consider the role multimodal composition plays in the first year writing classroom and beyond. Such studies will help bridge the transition from theory to practice.

The experiences we have had working with our students throughout this project have helped us to consider what changes could be beneficial in future iterations. As a result, we offer three suggestions for those interested in integrating multimodal composition into their own writing classrooms. First, it is important to attend to students' functional literacy. Too often instructors assume students already "know" how to use computers better than themselves. Teachers should take the time necessary to

provide students instruction on how to use various digital tools. Regardless of the multimodal composition assigned, we suggest that dedicated class time be used for functional literacy education of the digital tool being used. For instance, we dedicated class time to show students how to use Weebly, as many of our students were unfamiliar with constructing websites. Without that knowledge, students will be limited in the kinds of powerful, rhetorical documents they can make. Though multimodal composition affords students the opportunity to enhance their rhetorical literacy skills, we cannot expect our students to have an instant command of how to design and construct multimodal texts.

Second, writing instructors should scaffold multimodal projects. Rather than assigning these projects in a vacuum, it is beneficial to include, as part of regular class instruction, analyses of multimodal projects. As such, we encourage instructors to consider beginning multimodal composition units with instruction on how to extract meaning from a variety of modes. For instance, as our students were composing websites, we first taught students how to analyze existing websites in an effort to give students a mentor text. Doing so allows students to (1) develop an understanding of composition as manifested through various modalities and (2) utilize class multimodal texts as models for their own composition. It is, however, important to start small (e.g., hybrid essays). Students need time to practice and develop as readers and writers of multimodal texts; likewise, they require opportunities to interact with and analyze increasingly complex texts. Just as we expose students to traditional text-types before assigning alphabetic essays, so should we share with students multimodal compositions before assigning such projects.

Third, instructors should assign a range of composition projects (including traditional

and multimodal writing). Providing a wide variety of options increases the modes, tools, and rhetorical approaches available to writers. That is, students can benefit from chances to both create and consume both traditional and multimodal texts. Working with both text-types can help students to better understand the relationship between the two. Moreover, by exposing students to a wider range of compositions, students will be able to better decide which text type will be most effective for a particular rhetorical situation. Regardless of how multimodal composition is implemented, instructors should proceed purposefully and thoughtfully. In other words, teaching multimodal composition requires equal, and often additional, planning and instruction as that of the traditional writing classroom.

Prior to this project, we agreed with the scholars that multimodal composition had a place in first year writing, as the evidence clearly exists that 21st century writing is far more than producing alphabetic text. However, we strongly felt that we needed to hear from students to see how multimodal composition projects impacted them; given the positive change in student perception of writing and the noticeable ways students benefited from the multimodal composition projects, we believe, even more firmly, that assigning multimodal projects is of value for all writing instructors. Though our project expressly focused on first year writing, our findings support the notion that students in other classes can also find meaning and relevance in multimodal composition. Though there were limitations to this study—namely that we surveyed two classes and provided only three mini-case studies—we believe this study can act as a pilot study on the subject of multimodal composition and writing identity. Hopefully, more studies will begin to include student voice, so that instructors can see how these projects impact those we are educating.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following questions were used to start conversations; however, all of our interviews progressed organically, and we did not read all these questions as a script, per se. They were a starting point.

Initial Questions

1. What is your major/year?
2. Do you identify as a writer? Why/why not?
3. What contributes to (or shapes) your opinion on writing?
4. What is (describe) your perception of yourself as a writer? How effective do you feel you are when you write?
5. How much writing do you do in your other classes?
6. How much writing did you do before you came to Millikin?
7. What are you looking forward to in this class? Why? Is there any part of this class that has you apprehensive?
8. What kind of writing do you do outside of class?
9. What piece of writing are you most proud of? Why?
10. Have you ever considered websites, multimedia presentations, or blogs to be writing? Is this something you thought you would take on in a first year writing class? Why/why not? What do you consider to be writing?
11. Would you be willing to share any of the projects you crafted in IN 151?

Month-to-Month Informal Questions

1. Talk to me about the class to this point. How do you feel things are going?
2. Participants will be asked to bring one piece of writing with them to discuss. Questions associated with this:
 - a. Can you walk me through this piece of writing?
 - b. Why did you choose this one?
 - c. How does it represent you as a writer?
3. Describe your multimodal writing to this point.

Final Questions

1. Which project was your favorite and why?
2. How did writing for your website differ from the other writing you did in the class?
3. Will you consider integrating images into other kinds of writing you do? Can you think of examples where this might be useful?
4. How did the writing you did in this class impact your perception of writing? Did one project influence you more than another?
5. How did the writing you did in this class impact the ways in which you identify as a writer? Specifically, how did composing with images impact your identity as a writer?
6. Do you believe that using images in composition is a form of writing? Explain.
7. Can you walk me through your website and discuss the design and composition decisions you made?