Audio, Archives, and the Affordance of Listening in a Pedagogy of "Difference"

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Abstract

While attention to "affordance" has tended to focus on the forms of *production* that technologies encourage, this essay shifts emphasis to how different modes and mediums also afford certain kinds of *engagement* in the process of digital composing. Seeking a fresh pedagogical approach for how writing instructors and students might productively engage difficult issues of "difference" together, I argue that engaging audio archives of non-normative voices in the process of composing digital "audio collage" can afford iterative listening practices. Through a study of students' listening practices revealed in their audio compositions in a gender-themed composition course, I demonstrate the rewards of this pedagogical approach: an increased potential for "a stance of openness" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 17) to non-neutral texts and gender-critical inquiry, a greater sense of creative freedom and productive uncertainty felt by students, and the occasion to discuss fundamental issues in writing, including the process of coming to invention across a multitude of sources, the responsible appropriation of others' voices, issues of Fair Use and plagiarism, and the relationship between historical evidence and contemporary claims.
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> A technological affordance, or a suite of affordances, is *directional*, it *appeals* to us by making some forms of communicative interaction possible or easy and others difficult or impossible, by leading us to engage in or attempt certain kinds of rhetorical action rather than others.
> –Carolyn R. Miller

> [W]e need to develop and enact innovative pedagogies that will better negotiate students' resistance, precisely so they may *more productively engage with difference*.
> –Karen Kopelson

> Perhaps through *listening* we can avail ourselves with more possibilities for inventing arguments that bring differences together, for hearing differences as harmony or even as discordant notes.
> –Krista Ratcliffe

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1. Introduction

"Affordance" has become a terminological touchstone for digital scholars in rhetoric and composition, its usage underscoring the entwinement of rhetoric and technology. In Carolyn Miller's (2010) definition of affordance in the first epigraph, composers are the agential recipients of a medium's appeal, induced to craft specific rhetorical acts because they can and because they can't craft others. When digital scholars attend to the affordance of a mode or a medium, they tend to emphasize what kinds of composing its constraints help produce, such as the "particular affordances of sound" to "convey accent, emotion, music, [and] ambient sounds" (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 9) or the "affordances of a digitally connected, networked environment" to "enable combinations of sounds, images, motions, and words" (Adsanatham, Garrett, & Matzke, 2013, p. 317). Different modes (such as words or sounds) and different mediums (such as television or the Internet)[1] "afford" different rhetorical moves.

In pedagogical practice, however, a focus on the *production* that technologies afford can sublimate the *engagement* with texts and materials in the process of composing. In alphabetic writing pedagogy, acts of engagement have been called "reading-to-write" tasks (Flower, 1990, p. 3) to emphasize how engagement with existing texts is embroiled in the production of new ones; as Christina Haas reminded, "in a variety of literacy contexts—within and outside educational settings—much real writing arises in response to reading, and students' reading is often challenged, enriched, and evaluated by having them write" (1993, p. 19). Haas's argument remains cogent in multimodal composing, where engagement expands beyond reading to include listening, viewing, and clicking. Yet, multimodal composition scholarship has shown less attention to these acts of engagement than it has to composing for an imagined user, to exploiting the affordances of technology to reach a perceived audience.[2] This essay brings the longer pedagogical concern for engagement with texts into the multimodal composing context, shifting the emphasis of affordance to how different modes and mediums also *afford certain kinds of engagement* in the process of composing. This shift returns to the origins of "affordance," coined in 1979 by ecological psychologist James Gibson. Above all, Gibson was concerned with *perception*—with what guided our attention to some environmental aspects over others and how this sensory reception of an environment "afforded" different behaviors. In Gibson's theory, engagement was the condition for production, rather than the other way around.

While pedagogical attention to student engagement with texts and topics is important in any compositional process, it is particularly imperative in curricula that enact what Karen Kopelson has called a "pedagogical focus on 'difference'" (2003, p. 117). These feminist, queer, or critical pedagogy approaches ask students to recognize and challenge how "gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and many other markers of difference" can subordinate or privilege subjects (Luke & Gore, 1992, p. 1), or to queer the stability of these identity categories in the first place (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011).[3] As Kopelson explained, texts assigned in such pedagogical approaches can provoke resistance in some students who view them as an "*intrusion* of sorts, resenting and even actively rebelling against what they may experience as the 'imposition' of race, class, gender, sexuality, or (more generally) cultural issues on their 'neutral' course of study" (2003, p. 117, her emphasis). Student resistance to feelings of "intrusion" has much to do with how they engage with the politically charged materials; how they "attribute identity or intention to a writer in order to understand or account for a text" (Haas, 1993, p. 23); and how they map that reading onto their instructor, who may herself be marked by an identity of "difference." This, too, is an attribute of affordance. As Gibson explained, engagement is fundamentally guided by social relations of *difference*: "we pay closest attention to the optical and acoustic information that specifies what the other person is, invites, threatens, and does," before acting accordingly (1979, p. 128). Paying attention to how students engage with sources before and during multimodal composing means shifting our understanding of affordance back to Gibson and back to difference.

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[1] A mode is defined as a semiotic channel employed in composing, whereas mediums are "tools or material resources used to produce and disseminate texts" (Lauer, 2009, p. 227).

[2] For example, Rosinski and Squire (2009) examine how the HCI concept of "perceived affordance" (how a designer organizes the visual and navigational aspects of an interface based on assumptions about users) mirrored composition's focus on "*tapping into audience expectations* about a document's conventions and constraints—textually, visually, organizationally—in an effort to enhance readability and comprehension" (p. 152, my emphasis).

[3] My use of "difference" in this essay draws on Kopelson, Luke and Gore, and other feminist pedagogy scholars who have employed it an umbrella term for the vectors of identity that intersect and diverge in society and our classrooms. "Pedagogies of 'difference'" often draw attention to those vectors and the ways in which they construct, privilege, or subordinate subjects.