A Bag Full of Snakes: Negotiating the Challenges of Multimodal Composition

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Abstract

Because of the vast changes to the communication landscape over the last two decades, along with the influence of emerging technologies on students' writing practices, empirical studies that describe students' experiences in multimodal composing are required to determine how the goals and practices of composition teaching might be better supported and reimagined. In response to this exigency, this article presents findings from an empirical study of graduate and undergraduate writers' multimodal composing processes. Findings from focus group interviews and written reflections show that students' attempts to draw on their print-based rhetorical knowledge while composing multimodally worked well when they perceived print-based and multimodal composing tasks as similar, but they faced significant difficulties when they perceived the need to adapt their print-based composing knowledge to suit new or unfamiliar aspects of multimodal composing. Specifically, students found it difficult to conceptualize an audience and negotiate the multiple semiotic resources afforded by multimodal composing. In an effort to mitigate such challenges, we provide two conceptual frameworks that help students move more fluidly between print-based and multimodal composing. These pedagogical approaches enable writing specialists to better support students' efforts to engage successfully in multimodal composition tasks. Published by Elsevier Inc.

> "Your project is in a controlled space with traditional academic writing. I have these thoughts, but I know the box I'm going to put them in. But this other thing—multimodal composing—is like having a bag full of snakes. It's like I don't know what I'm doing with all this. I'm not in control of any of it. . . The problem here is that nothing is the same."
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> –Duncan, graduate student in study

1. Introduction

For well over two decades, the field of computers and writing has been interested in the ways that digital composing technologies shape and re-shape the way literacy is defined, valued, investigated, and learned (e.g., Gee, 2003; Hawisher & Selfe, 1999; Kress, 2003; Selber, 2004; Selfe & Hawisher, 2004). This rich body of scholarship has emphasized the social nature of multimodal writing (Barton & Hyman, 2012); how rhetorical concepts transfer to multimodal composition (Ball, 2006; Powell, Alexander, & Borton, 2011); the need for assignments that utilize a range of semiotic

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resources (Fulwiler & Middleton, 2012; Sheppard, 2009; Shipka, 2011); and practical ways to implement multiliteracies pedagogies into writing classrooms (Bowen & Whithaus, 2013; Selber, 2004; Selfe, 2007; Sorapure, 2006).

These advances in digital writing research present new questions for scholars and teachers, including two questions central to discussions of multimodal writing[1] pedagogies: 1) To what extent does students' alphabetic rhetorical knowledge enable or inhibit their ability to successfully navigate multimodal composition tasks? And 2) Which aspects of students' print-based rhetorical knowledge enable and inhibit composers' attempts to successfully navigate multimodal composition tasks?

Questions concerning the transfer of writing knowledge have been central to discussions in rhetoric and composition studies for nearly three decades (Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; Carroll, 2002; Dias, Freedman, Medway, & Paré, 1999; McCarthy, 1987; Russell, 1995; Smit, 2004; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990; Wardle, 2007, 2009). Of longstanding interest for transfer researchers has been understanding the extent to which writers transfer what they learn from one task to another, from one class to another, from one school year to the next, and from school to the workplace. One important development in recent transfer research has been the reconceptualization of traditional notions of transfer (see, for example, DePalma & Ringer, 2011; Nowacek, 2011). Such work has demonstrated that while transfer does involve applying past writing knowledge to new situations, it also entails reshaping, adapting, re-situating, extending, and recontextualizing writing and genre knowledge (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012; Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Devitt, 2007; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey, 2012; Tardy, 2009). This emerging interest in processes of adaptive transfer has prompted transfer researchers to begin to consider the ways writers mobilize and transform print-based writing knowledge and skills while engaging in multimodal composing tasks (see, for example, DePalma, 2015).

Not surprisingly, writing scholars hold a range of views concerning the extent to which print-based rhetorical knowledge and composing processes transfer to multimodal contexts. Some scholars posit that multimodal composition teaches students many of the same rhetorical skills that they learn in print-based composing tasks (Alexander, 2013; Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007). Those working from this view assert that writers composing multimodally still must analyze an audience, choose a purpose, craft rhetorical appeals, and negotiate many of the same decision-making processes required in print-based writing situations. In addition, they argue that the stages of the alphabetic writing process are applicable to multimodal composition—students must invent, draft, revise, and edit when composing a multimodal text just like they do when composing a written essay.

Others resist this view and assert that the conventional work of composition teaching must be reimagined to suit the exigencies of multimodal composing situations. In "Looking for Sources of Coherence in a Fragmented World: Notes toward a New Assessment Design," Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) articulated this need clearly:

> If we are to value this new composition. . .we will need to invent a language that allows us to speak to these new values. Without a new language, we will be held hostage to the values informing print, values worth preserving for that medium, to be sure, but values incongruent with those informing the digital. (pp. 89–90)

One context that illuminates this tension is in the assessment of multimodal texts. For a number of scholars, the criteria for assessing student learning in multimodal composing can be derived from the theoretical frameworks and pedagogical practices best suited to assessing student learning in print-based texts. Borton and Huot (2007), for example, stated, "In assessing multimodal texts. . . [s]mart teachers will use what they already know about rhetorical theory and practice to assess multimodal texts effectively" (p. 110). In line with this view, Elizabeth A. Murray, Hailey A. Sheets, and Nicole A. Williams (2010) asserted that "we can use the same rubric during the grading process regardless of if students are being asked to complete a single-mode or multiple-mode assignment." Others, however, have rejected such claims. Madeleine Sorapure (2006), for example, argued that using a broad rhetorical approach to assess multimodal compositions is problematic because "it doesn't in itself offer any specific guidance or criteria for handling the multimodal aspects of the composition" (p. 3).

Another layer of the discussion shaping much of the discourse surrounding multimodal composition pedagogy is the assumption that students—as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) who have been immersed in technology since their early

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[1] In our view, multimodal compositions are texts that employ multiple semiotic resources to purposefully convey meaning. Our understanding of the term "multimodal composition" draws from both the New London Group's (1996) definition of combining modes of meaning into a single composition (p. 84) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) definition: "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined" (p. 20).