



The Evaluative Dynamics of Multimodal Composing

Ben Gunsberg*

Utah State University, 3200 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-3200 USA

Abstract

This article examines the turn toward multimodality by presenting findings from a semester-long ethnographic study of an upper-level college English course that requires students to compose multimodal Internet texts using Adobe Flash Professional. The analysis of participants' attributions of value to Flash clarifies why students were motivated to pursue some goals and not others when faced with numerous choices related to the composition of their multimedia projects. The value students attributed to Flash tended to arise from three sources: 1) students' sense of Flash's professional potency; 2) students' interest in creating interactive elements and visual effects; and 3) the technical challenges students faced while learning the program. Students tended to attribute more value to the visual and interactive elements of their multimodal projects than to research and written content. These findings help substantiate scholars' calls for truly integrated approaches to teaching multimodal composition, approaches that help students develop the nuanced recognition that all elements of their multimodal compositions are crucial and must work together. The author argues that such recognition might be cultivated through the writing of value statements, wherein students reflect on the evaluative dynamics that shape their goals and choices.

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In the past two decades conceptions of literacy have shifted dramatically in response to the proliferation of digital and Internet technology. An important marker of this shift is the 1996 publication of "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" wherein influential literacy theorists known as the [New London Group](#) propose a shift away from language-only conceptions of literacy, coining the term "multiliteracies" to encompass the "multiplicity of communications channels and the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world today" (p. 60). To remain relevant to students' interests and workplace demands, the authors posit, literacy instruction should take into account meaning making that centers on visual, auditory, behavioral, and spatial modes in addition to text-oriented literacy practices (p. 64). Many scholars in rhetoric and composition have made arguments that resonate with the New London Group's multiliteracies proposal. [Carolyn Handa \(2004\)](#), for example, argues that writing pedagogy should include a focus on visual rhetoric because "[students] are and will be constantly exposed to new media throughout their personal, academic and professional lives" (p. 12). Like the New London Group, Handa suggests that alphabetic-only writing and literacy pedagogy appears outdated and meager in light of technological change. In "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," Kathleen Blake [Yancey](#) points to "the proliferation of writings outside the academy" as well as to genres emerging from new technologies as reasons for colleges and universities to develop undergraduate majors in writing (p. 298). Yancey's argument for the disciplinary expansion of composition studies echoes the New London Group's

* Tel.: +919 208 7539.

E-mail address: ben.gunsberg@usu.edu

proposal and resonates with the work of [Stuart Selber \(2004\)](#); [Anne Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc \(2004\)](#), [Jody Shipka \(2005, 2009, 2011\)](#); [Cynthia Selfe \(2007\)](#) and many others who suggest that writing instruction should extend beyond the composition of alphabetic texts, that students should be taught how to compose multimodal texts in rhetorically savvy ways as well.

Increased calls for attention to multimodal learning and composing invite literacy theorists and compositionists to engage the lively possibilities and vexing questions arising out of multimodal curricular contexts. One of the most pressing questions teachers/scholars face pertains to the appropriate integration of different media and modes of representation. [Selfe's \(2007\)](#) edited collection, *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, offers excellent guidance for instructors interested in combining still images, animations, video, and audio, and yet, as [Selfe \(2007\)](#) notes, such efforts pose “new and unfamiliar challenges to many teachers and students,” including those related to helping students choose topics that take full advantage of the capabilities of the media brought into play, teaching students how to use unfamiliar technology, and introducing students to the many genres that reside under the grand tent of “multimodal composition” (p.17). [Shipka \(2005\)](#) offers a “multimodal task-based framework” to help teachers and students negotiate “the complex communicative tasks” inherent to multimodal curricular contexts (p. 277). One important component of this framework is a written account in which students are required to reflect on “the goals they aimed to achieve with their work,” and address “how the rhetorical, material, methodological, and technological choices they made contributed to the realization of their goals” (p. 287). Shipka’s suggestion that reflective written accounts remain integral to multimodal assignments is echoed by [Micky Hess's \(2007\)](#) assertion that “effective composing assignments. . . involve students in reflection about not only the processes, but the products of composing” (p. 29). Such calls for reflection are certainly not new to composition studies. As [Shipka \(2005\)](#) argues, however, they take on pressing significance in curricular contexts that present students with a multitude of technological and representational possibilities.

This article examines the turn toward multimodality, presenting findings from a semester-long ethnographic study of an upper-level college English course that requires students to compose multimodal Internet texts using Adobe Flash Professional, a popular multimedia authoring program, which they accessed through State University computers. I should add that while students’ relied heavily on Flash, other Adobe applications, such as Dreamweaver and Photoshop, came into play as well. For example, students often edited images in Photoshop before using Flash to turn images into interactive buttons. Here I focus on participants’ attributions of value to Flash, highlighting the competitive dynamics that can emerge when students integrate multiple media and representational modes in the same digital document. By analyzing the value attributed to Flash, this study clarifies why students were motivated to pursue some goals and not others when faced with numerous choices related to the composition of their multimedia projects. These findings help substantiate scholars’ calls for truly integrated approaches to teaching multimodal composition, such as those proposed by [Shipka \(2005, 2009, 2011\)](#); [Madeleine Sorapure \(2006b\)](#); [Selfe \(2007\)](#); and [Jennifer Sheppard \(2009\)](#), approaches that help students develop the nuanced recognition that all elements of their multimodal compositions are crucial and must work together. While these findings are preliminary and limited in scope, they suggest that there is much to learn about students’ evaluations of composing with different media and modes of representation, particularly in contexts where students are required to work with novel technologies. Addressing the pedagogical implications of these findings, I conclude by arguing for the merits of reflective writing within multimodal curricular contexts, and, more specifically, for “value statements” that grant students opportunities to reflect on the evaluative dynamics that shape their goals and choices.

1. The Study

For fifteen weeks, during Fall semester, 2008, I observed and interviewed 11 participants (two teachers and nine students) in “Humanities and Technology,” an upper-level English course offered at a large, public university (“State University”).¹ This was a seminar-lab course co-taught by two senior faculty members from the Department of English and the School of Information. The students enrolled in the course ranged from sophomores to first-year graduate students (both Master’s students in the School of Information), and their majors included English, Information Science, History, and Computer Engineering. Seven of the nine students were female and all identified as “white/Caucasian.”

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms.

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