From Screen to Screen: Students' Use of Popular Culture Genres in Multimodal Writing Assignments

Bronwyn T. Williams *

University of Louisville Department of English University of Louisville 2211 South Brook Street Louisville, KY 40292

Abstract

As digital media have created the opportunity to compose multimodal texts, there has been growing attention paid to how best to define and teach genres such as videos or podcasts, to writing students. What has gone largely unexamined, however, is the influence of popular culture genres on students' conceptions of and approaches to composing multimodal texts. Yet much of students' engagement with texts outside the classroom revolves around popular culture, whether offline in the form of film and television or online with digital media such as online video and computer games. This essay explores, through student interviews and textual analysis, how student responses to multimodal assignments in college writing courses draw on popular culture genres, both explicitly and implicitly, in ways that students find unremarkable, but of which their instructors are often unaware. We must make productive use of the connections–and tensions–created when students' employ their knowledge of popular culture genres for multimodal projects.

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Bronwyn T. Williams is a professor of English at the University of Louisville. He writes and teaches about issues of literacy, popular culture, identity, digital media, and creative nonfiction. His recent books include: *New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders* (With Amy A. Zenger); *Shimmering Literacies: Popular Culture and Reading and Writing Online*; *Popular Culture and Representations of Literacy (with Amy Zenger)*; *Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education*; and *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing*.

While you were still explaining the assignment, I thought about doing a music video. Music is a big deal for me so I turned to that right away. I was listening to Pink Floyd, obviously, and I was like "Oh, that's cool, how 'Money' opens with all the different sounds." And I thought "Hey, I could do that."–Cathy[1]

> I knew I wanted to make a video about my research about fantasy football and how it changes how fans watch the games. So I thought about how to use the familiar ways we see sports to comment on that. I didn't want to just do another music-video looking thing. As soon as I made that decision I had this vision of a football video game that I knew I wanted to use.–Marie

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +502 852 2173.
  E-mail address: bronwyn.williams@louisville.edu

[1] All student names are pseudonyms

When students are given assignments that ask them to produce texts for screens, they often turn initially for their models to the screens they already know from popular culture. In terms of rhetorical and semiotic resources, as well as inspiration, they turn to the popular culture with which they are deeply familiar. While it shouldn't surprise us that students are familiar with popular culture genres, it is not clear that we engage their knowledge effectively when it comes to multimodal literacy practices

In recent years scholars have examined the role of genre in student writing (Bawarshi, 2003; Devitt, 2004) as well as the influence of genres outside the classroom on student writing (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Dunbar-Odom, 2007; Knobel, 1999; Williams, 2002, 2009). As digital media have created the opportunity to compose multimodal texts, there has been growing attention paid to how best to define and teach genres of multimodal texts, such as videos or podcasts, to writing students (Selfe, 2009; Wysocki, 2004). When it has come time to consider the multimodal genres students encounter outside the classroom, however, most of the attention has been paid to finding out whether students have already created videos or podcasts or webpages on their own. What has gone largely unexamined is the influence of popular culture genres on students' conceptions of and approaches to composing these kinds of digital multimodal texts. Yet much of students' engagement with texts outside the classroom revolves around popular culture, whether offline in the form of film and television or online with digital media such as online video and computer games. In this essay I explore, through student interviews and textual analysis, how student responses to digital video and image-focused multimodal assignments in college writing courses draw on popular culture genres. Though there are many ways to define and employ the term "multimodal," for brevity's sake, in this article, I am using the term to refer specifically to digital projects that ask students to employ video or images. I examine how popular culture genres influence students' composing practices, both explicitly and implicitly, in ways that students find unremarkable, but of which their instructors are often unaware. I focus, in particular, on how the students in different sections of the same course I taught turned to popular culture genres when given a multimodal composition assignment. In both courses I draw from the texts students composed and from interviews I conducted with them after the semester had ended. While students in both courses used popular culture content and genres in their projects, their critical awareness of genre and their analytical depth changed depending on whether I taught explicitly about the genre conventions that shape popular culture texts.

The interviews with students illustrate that, when faced with composing for a text that will be seen on a screen, the students turned to their familiarity with popular culture genres of film, television, and video games to help them make sense of the rhetorical, narrative, and stylistic demands of the new assignment. In the interviews the students discussed how they conceived of their compositions in the contexts of popular culture genres with which they were familiar, regardless of whether they had discussed such genres in class. What this illustrates is that popular culture genres, then, enter our classrooms and influence students' multimodal composing practices regardless of whether instructors address the genres explicitly.

On the one hand, students' use of popular culture genres as a rhetorical and semiotic resources for their course work can result in texts that are creative and engaging. The problem can be that, without explicit conversations about popular culture genre conventions and how they might or might not work in course assignments, the use of the genre conventions can sometimes not fulfill the instructor's goals for the assignment. The tensions that can develop when students try to adapt one genre to fit another, in any context, can bewilder and frustrate students and instructors alike. Yet, when popular culture genres were discussed in class, the students demonstrated a more critical perspective on their own work, as well as more innovative moves in understanding and working popular culture genres. Interviews with students also demonstrated that digital media were resulting in new and evolving popular culture genres—such as YouTube videos—that students draw on in the same way they draw on film and television.

This project has pedagogical implications for how we can make productive use of the connections—and tensions—created when students employ their knowledge of popular culture genres for multimodal projects. If we are serious in composition about the role antecedent genres have on students' work in the classroom, then we must pay attention to the popular culture texts with which students have so much experience. I argue that if we address in more direct and creative ways the role of popular culture's influences in multimodal composing, we will engage students in a more sophisticated and critical awareness of the intersections between popular culture genres and multimodal writing assignments. Such pedagogical approaches will help students become more critically conscious in creating their texts for our classes and more thoughtful in their engagement with popular culture and questions of genre outside the writing classroom.