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## Taking stock: Multimodality in writing center users' texts

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### Abstract

Though much scholarship exists suggesting *why* multimodal writing should be taught at the college-level and *how* it might be addressed in writing and multiliteracy centers, no previous studies have tried to document to what degree students *are* bringing multimodal texts to the writing or multiliteracy center. This article is a first attempt to study writing center users' texts for multimodality. We find through studying users at a university with required multimodal instruction in two required first-year writing classes and advertised support for multimodal writing that few students bring multimodal texts to the writing center, few know what the term "multimodal" means, and none in the sample bring in texts composed in more than two modes. In the conclusion, we offer suggestions based on these findings for first-year writing instructors, writing center professionals, and for faculty teaching writing across the campus. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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One day, after we added the question "Is this a multimodal project?" to our writing center registration form, Jennifer peeked at what the students currently in the center had selected. Two students were there to work on the exact same first-year writing assignment for the same professor. Their assignment seemed to be called a "web text," yet one student clicked "yes" it was multimodal and the other did not. As the weeks went by, nearly every walk-in appointment looked puzzled when they got to that question on the form, and asked, "What's multimodal?"

### 1. Introduction

For over a decade now, discussions of multimodal composition have figured largely in writing studies and writing center scholarship. The question of *why* we should incorporate multimodal analysis and production into writing classrooms (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Handa, 2004; Hobbs, 2004; Wysocki, 2004; Davis & Shadle, 2007; Yancey, 2008; Kress, 2010; Shipka, 2011; Arola & Wysocki, 2012; Bowen & Whithaus, 2013; Lutkewitte, 2013) and into writing/multiliteracy centers (Sheridan, 2006; Grutsch McKinney, 2009; Sheridan & Inman, 2010; Balester et al., 2012; Lee & Carpenter, 2013) has been—we might even say *definitively*—answered. As a results of this scholarship,

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the practice of multimodal critique and production is largely advocated as necessary for students in first-year writing and feedback on multimodal projects is seen as appropriate and necessary within writing centers.

Most of this existing multimodal scholarship is of the evangelical vein: scholars writing to compel others to adapt new strategies in response to new literacies practices and to do so sooner rather than later. Our own program was highly influenced by such scholarship. We took up, for instance, Cynthia Selfe's (2004) charge that "English composition teachers have got to be willing to expand their own understanding of composing beyond conventional bounds of the alphabetic. And we have to do so quickly or risk having composition studies become increasingly irrelevant" (p. 54) in our work at Ball State University, where our writing program and writing center were relatively early adopters of multimodal composition in 2006–07. At this time, a survey conducted by Anderson et al. (2006) showed that multimodality was becoming common in individual classrooms (84% of universities surveyed said that individual faculty used it), but was far less common (24%) as a part of the overall curriculum (p. 69). Our program did decide to require multimodal production in all of our first-year writing courses; most of our 18,000 undergraduate students take two first-year writing courses. Faculty and teaching assistants were (and are) given professional development in teaching multimodal writing. The same year, our writing center began training our tutors to work with multimodal texts. Thus, in theory, virtually all of our undergraduates are introduced to multimodal production in their first year, and supported in production through the writing center throughout their years. In brief, we built the kind of writing program and writing center that is often advocated in the scholarship on multimodality, and when the program received a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Certificate of Excellence in 2007, reviewers noted the curricular focus and professional development for teachers and tutors on multimodality as significant.

What is less prevalent in existing scholarship, particularly within writing center scholarship, are studies on multimodality, especially in terms of how teachers or tutors teach multimodality and the degree to which students choose multimodal composition as they write.<sup>1</sup> Such studies can move us beyond *why* we should teach and tutor multimodal writing towards a different question altogether: what is happening (here) with multimodal writing? This new question will escort us from think pieces on multimodality to qualitative and quantitative studies that will lend us a different vantage on the teaching and tutoring of multimodal writing by helping us see what happens when theories of multimodal teaching and tutoring turn to practice in specific contexts. We see the future of multiliteracy/writing centers depending more on qualitative and quantitative studies to shape and revise practices and pedagogies.

This article is a small start in this direction. We sought to take stock of how many students bring multimodal texts to our writing center, what modes are used in their texts, and whether they label their texts "multimodal." Multiliteracy centers and writing centers that support multimodal composition rest on the assumption that students will learn how multimodal writing affords different types of expression than monomodal writing, and, once introduced, we suppose that students will use multimodality in their writing as they progress through their degrees and that we'll see these texts in our centers. Yet, these assumptions that (1) students will be prompted or allowed to use multimodality in future writing, (2) that students will recognize their work as multimodal, and (3) that we will see a great degree of multimodality in the writing center have not been confirmed through empirical research at our institution or elsewhere.

We felt our own university was a rich site to study students' use of multimodal writing and the presence of such texts at the writing center, as there has been programmatic and curricular support here for multimodal composition for nearly a decade now. Because major changes, such as the change from alphabetic literacy to multiliteracies within a curriculum, take time to ripple through an institution, we thought our site would provide a good place to take stock of the state of students' multimodal texts more so than a university where curricular or programmatic changes were only recently made or not yet in place.

Specifically, we sought to address three research questions through an artifact analysis study:

1. Are collected texts from writing center users multimodal?
2. What modes do students use in creation of their texts?
3. Do students call their texts multimodal?

In addition to being useful to us institutionally, this study will be part of the shift from scholarship that merely proselytizes multimodal writing to scholarship that studies multimodal writing *in situ*. In answering these questions,

<sup>1</sup> One recent exception to this was DePalma and Alexander (2015).

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