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Multimodal Composition Pedagogy Designed to Enhance Authors' Personal Agency: Lessons from Non-academic and Academic Composing Environments

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Abstract

This article argues that composing in multiple modes, especially when accompanied by revision and self-reflection, enhances compositional fluidity and encourages the exercise of personal agency. To illustrate and support their claims, the authors describe and share student work from two non-academic multimodal composing contexts as well as one college writing class.

Keywords: Multimodal composition; Visual communication; First-year writing; Non-academic writing; Museum-based learning; Game-based learning; Leisure learning

Composition has taken a "multimodal turn" in recent years, in part because "instructors and students are recognizing that old and new technologies have enabled, and even demanded, the use of more than one mode to communicate, entertain, solve problems, and engage in deliberation" (Lutkewitte, 2014, p. 2). As is often the case when a field takes a "turn," which in this case began with work on visual texts (George, 2002; Hocks, 2003) and extended to other compositional modes (Arola, Sheppard, & Ball, 2014; Selfe, 2007, 2009; Shipka, 2005, 2009; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004), early forays help us envision the pedagogical and curricular potentials that multimodality affords, as well as the practicalities of how to teach, grade, and assess these unfamiliar genres (Burnett, Frazee, Hanggi, & Madden, 2014; Shipka, 2009, 2011; Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007).

The idea of multimodality, if not the term itself, has been around for a long time; in fact, Jason Palmeri's (2012) history documents fifty years of multimodal composition. The current turn can arguably be dated to 1999-2000, when Gunther Kress observed that the "landscape of composition is changing fundamentally" (1999, p. 67), an assertion that was quickly affirmed by the New London Group a year later when they advocated for a "pedagogy of multiliteracies" that embraces both the "multiplicity of communication channels and media" and the "increased saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" (2000, p. 5). Nearly two decades later, we are, as a profession, still *turning* toward multimodality in composition teaching, research, and administration. We are still calling for assessment and accountability; still trying to ascertain best pedagogical practices; still grappling with how to teach and engage with the many complexities of multimodal composition, including rhetorical, technological, argumentative, and genre-based; and yes, still wondering

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whether multimodality even belongs in the writing classroom. What we do seem to agree on is that effective multimodal composing, like effective composing in a single—usually written—mode, is more than simply accumulating bits of information one upon the other, more than merely including multimodality within composition (Alexander & Rhodes, 2014, p. 4). The goal with multimodal composition, as with composition in any single mode, is for students to practice so that they can synthesize modes, genres, ideas, and skills, and become ever more fluid and flexible composers.

A proponent of multimodal composition, Kathleen Blake Yancey (2004) notes that fresh ideas for our courses and curricula frequently come from outside of the immediate field of composition. Indeed, in this article, we present three scenarios from three different composing contexts—two non-academic and one academic—to argue that composing in multiple modes, especially when accompanied by opportunities for revision and self-reflection, affords compositional fluidity and encourages the exercise of personal agency. While the three composing contexts were conceived and enacted separately over several years, we believe that each builds on and reinforces the others. In combination they demonstrate unique lessons for fostering the growth of personal agency within a robust learning environment that extends beyond the "limited structures of writing and writing instruction" (Wysocki, 2004, p. 20) to more expansive contexts such as writers' communities and their professional careers.

Our definition of agency comes from Anne Wysocki's chapter, "Opening New Media to Writing: Openings & Justifications." "We have agency," writes Wysocki, "insofar as we recognize how we are positioned by and hence can work with and within our particular historically situated and contingent material conditions." She continues, "Because the structures into which we have grown up are neither necessary nor fixed, they can be changed when we forge new positions for ourselves among them, or when we construct new relations between the different structures that matter to us" (Wysocki, 2004, p. 4). For Wysocki, "agency comes precisely in being alert to the 'social forms' . . . in which we move, in understanding where and how we and our practices fit, and hence where and how we have room and opportunity to make change" (Wysocki, 2004, p. 13). These "social forms" are brought into our classrooms in various ways, sometimes accompanied by a call to action (as, for example, within a service learning or community engagement course). Opportunities to exercise agency (Wysocki, 2004, p. 6), with or without an explicit call to action, can be thoroughly embedded within and elicited through the material structures we introduce into our classrooms. When experiences and materials are decontextualized, Wysocki worries that "agency and material structures look independent" from one another and from the world, when in fact they are tightly interdependent and mutually influential (Wysocki, 2004, p. 4).

According to the New London Group, embracing multimodality has two "principal aspects." The first involves accounting for "our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies" (2000, p. 9), an aspect that we do not address in this article. For our purposes, the New London Group's second aspect of multimodality, the challenge that "literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" is more relevant, especially because it highlights the intertwining of agency and technology (New London Group, 2000, p. 9).

Accounting for this "burgeoning variety of text forms," requires, as Jody Shipka suggests, that we "do more than simply expand the media and communicative contexts in which students work" (Shipka, 2005, p. 278). Expanding these contexts or "material structures" beyond the curricular to the extra-curricular, by, as Yancey puts it, "bring[ing] together the writing outside of school and that inside" (2004, p. 308), extends the possibilities for enactment of personal agency. What, when, where, how, and why might students compose when they are not locked into the role of students? And how can teachers and other facilitators encourage writers to be alert to opportunities to exercise personal agency through their composing?

To explore these questions, we describe three multimodal composing scenarios. The first two were part of evaluation research conducted by Author 1 and funded by the National Science Foundation in support of mechanisms to facilitate the learning of STEM concepts and content outside of a formal school environment. The third scenario describes a multimodal assignment in Author 2's college composition classroom, which was designed to engage students in exploring their future careers and the companies for which they might work. We describe the multimodal compositions assigned in each composing environment. In so doing, we articulate our evolving views on the relationship between multimodal composition and the enhancement of writers' agency. The contexts and their available material structures of composing, as anecdotal accounts, illustrate how personal agency can be fostered through composing multimodally. We expect readers of this article to gain some insight about assigning, supporting, and assessing multimodal compositions that encourage students to recognize the extent to which they have personal agency and to guide them toward identifying ways in which they could exercise that agency.