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## Computers &amp; Education

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/compedu](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/compedu)

# Transmediating argumentation: Students composing across written essays and digital videos in higher education

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 20 February 2016

Received in revised form 8 August 2016

Accepted 9 August 2016

Available online 11 August 2016

## Keywords:

Argumentation

Multimodality

Transmediation

Digital literacies

Higher education

## ABSTRACT

This comparative study examined how university students built an argument in written essays and multimodal digital videos, and how their argumentation transmediated across these two mediums. Data analysis involved 1) analysis of content in both written essays and digital videos; 2) the development of transmediation visualizations to elucidate how ideas were transformed from essays into videos; and 3) multimodal analysis to understand the communicative affordances and constrains for argumentation with each medium. The findings revealed that the most common type of content in both essays and videos was supportive argumentation; however, the videos did not include any counter-argumentation. Students transformed different amounts of ideas in different ways when transmediating their argumentation from essays into videos. Both assignments offered unique affordances for building an argument based on their modes of communication.

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The argumentative essay is the most common genre that students are assigned to write in higher education (Wingate, 2012), perhaps because it is viewed as an effective vehicle for constructing knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines (Tynjälä, 1998; Wu, 2006). When argumentative essays are approached holistically, as in this study, a *written argument* refers to the whole text (see Wingate, 2012), and *building an argument* to the way in which writers construct “a connected series of statements intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position” (Andrews, 1995, p. 3).

According to Wingate (2012), the process of building an argument in a written essay consists of three components: (1) the analysis and evaluation of content knowledge, (2) the writer's development of a position, and (3) the articulation of that position in a coherent manner. First, writers are required to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information and to identify different, conflicting viewpoints drawn from multiple sources. They should also be able to evaluate which ideas are useful in providing sufficient evidence for the essay. Second, writers need to be able to compare and contrast evidence found in the literature when establishing their own position. When achieved in a sophisticated manner, writers will have evaluated, weighed, and combined arguments and counter-arguments in support of their position they are seeking to establish (Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007). Finally, the evidence should be organized as a logical text structure so that it clearly establishes the position taken.

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Digital multimodal compositions—which interweave text, sound, visuals, and movement—can also be used to construct knowledge in different disciplines (Ho, Nelson, & Müller-Wittig, 2011; Kucirkova, Messer, Sheehy, & Panadero, 2014; Looi, Chen, & Ng, 2010). Such multimodal projects (e.g., digital videos, podcasts, websites), when assigned in academic contexts, can also integrate Wingate's (2012) three components for building an argument; however, these compositions may take different shape when constructed through multiple modes and digital tools.

Despite the fact that a growing majority of youth communicate multimodally outside of school (Lenhart, 2015; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and many educators have begun to integrate multimodal projects into the curriculum (Miller, 2013), there is a paucity of research examining how students build an argument using multiple modes in digital environments. Furthermore, little to no research has examined the relationship between written and multimodal argumentation. That is, how ideas *transmediate*—or translate content from one sign system into another (Suhor, 1984)—between argumentative written essays and argumentative digital videos.

This study addresses these unexplored areas by examining how university students built and transmediated argumentation across these two different mediums. Through comparative analysis (Stake, 2006), we examined how argumentation was constructed in each medium, traveled across them, and the unique communicative affordances offered by each medium.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Multimodal theoretical frameworks were used to understand how students built and transmediated arguments across written essays and digital videos. In the following section, we describe how these theoretical lenses were employed and relevant research.

### 1.1. Multimodality

Although there are different approaches to multimodality (Jewitt, 2009), including multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran, 2004) and multimodal interactional analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), this study employs a social semiotics framework to understand how students built an argument with different modes. Vital to a social semiotics framework (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988) is the understanding that various modes are integral in meaning-making. Modes are socially shaped and culturally given resources for communication—encompassing a variety of elements, including but not limited to text, speech, visuals, animation, gesture, and sound (Kress, 2010).

When applied to multimodal literacies, the social semiotics framework reframes composition and emphasizes how meaning is created through the synergistic relationship between modes in communication ensembles (Stein, 2008). Within these ensembles, the interaction between modes is significant for meaning-making and the unique combination of different modes communicates messages that no single mode communicates on its own. Composers “orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of mode. The meanings in any mode are always interwoven with the meanings made with those of all other modes co-present and co-operating in the communication event” (Jewitt, 2009, p. 15). These intersemiotic relationships between modes are a main focus of inquiry in multimodal literacy research, which includes analyzing how co-occurring modes align to emphasize a complementary message (Dalton et al., 2015) or diverge to create dissonance and convey different messages simultaneously (Unsworth, 2006).

Social semiotics also elucidates how modes are shaped by sociocultural factors that influence how they are employed in communication. A mode carries with it specific communicative histories and affordances for making meaning, which also interact and contribute to the constructed multimodal message (Van Leeuwen, 2005). These affordances of a mode, offer potentials that make it better for certain communicative tasks than other modes (Kress, 2003). For example, a composer might be able to build an argument through visuals and sound in a way that is not possible solely through writing (Jewitt, 2009).

### 1.2. Argumentation through multiple modes

Despite the debate among researchers in the field of argumentation as to whether visual representation alone can build an argument, there seems to be a general agreement that visuals and imagery can play an important role in argumentation especially when combined with other modes (Kjeldsen, 2015). Blair posits (2015) that an argument—a claim and a reason or group of reasons supporting it—can be expressed verbally, visually, or multimodally. Others, like Roque (2012), focus on the different relationships between verbal and visual modes in argumentation. The visual can be intended merely as a “visual flag” to draw readers' attention without having any specific argumentative function (Roque, 2012). Alternatively, the visual and verbal mode can present the same, parallel argument. Finally, the visual and verbal can be either combined (joint argument) or juxtaposed (contrasting argument). Birdsell and Groarke (2007) also point out that images can be used for rhetorical purposes, for example, to appeal to readers' emotions or identify with the point of view of the writer. These different types of interplay between the visual and verbal modes can be used to develop and articulate a position when composing a digital video. In addition to words and images, the multimodal argument can include any combination of words,

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