Understanding Modal Affordances: Student Perceptions of Potentials and Limitations in Multimodal Composition

Kara Poe Alexander, Beth Powell & Sonya C. Green

Alexander, Powell and Green explore what traditional, nontraditional, and basic writing students view as the affordances, or potentials and limitations, of multimodal composition. These affordances include the potentials of layering, implicit persuasion, audience awareness, creativity, and affective appeals, and the limitation of a lack of a clear thesis. In conclusion, the authors offer pedagogical considerations for instructors who assign multimodal composition in their classrooms.

Introduction

Over the past several years, rhetoric and composition has come to regard writing as one modality among many that students, from less-experienced to more advanced, can choose from when designing messages and constructing meaning. This shift toward "multiliteracies" has led to the inclusion in our classrooms of multimodal assignments, or compositions that move beyond alphabetic print to utilize additional modes as well, such as audio, video, or still image. Through multimodal composing, students are merging their composing practices outside the classrooms with those in the classroom (Selfe and Takayoshi 1), becoming more critical readers and writers (Callow 20; Hill 116; Jewitt 321), and being equipped for the types of writing they will do in college and the workplace (DeVoss, Johansen, Selfe, and Williams 169; Faigley 178-9; Hill 108). For basic writers and nontraditional students more specifically, multimodal composition validates personal experience by blending private and public lives (Rankins-Robertson, Cahill, Roen, and Glau 63), enhances understanding of the importance of writing skills (Smith 35), and makes them more effective users of digital media (Klages and Clark 39).

Multimodal composition also provides a unique opportunity for student writers to explore the "affordances" of texts, or the unique representational abilities of a mode. Gunther Kress explains, "Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they afford different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world, and through this differential engagement with the world they facilitate differential possibilities of development" ("Design" 157). In other words, semiotic modes have particular affordances that offer potentials and limitations for communication and representation. Print affordances, for instance, typically involve linear, sequential logic and evidence showing time and sequence (Ball; Fahnestock and Secor; Walsh).[1] Audio affordances include accent, tone of voice, mood, or music, and video affordances comprise movement, process, and passage of time (Keller). The visual in general affords "showing" meaning to an audience (Walsh) as well as representing space and simultaneity (Kress, "Visual and Verbal"), while the multimodal provides a non-linear, non-sequential interactive reading pattern (Walsh) that supports the genres and media of real-world audiences and lends itself more to public writing (Rankins-Robertson, *et al.* 65).

In addition to potentials and limitations, modal affordances also impact the level of success the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos have on readers. Some perceive, for example, music or images as affording a specific kind of appeal to pathos (Alexander and Losh; Ball and Moeller; Halbritter). Birdsell and Groarke argue that the pathos employed in a video of a horrible crime is more persuasive than a written description (3). Print simply would not afford viewers the vicarious experience of a crime scene that images, music, and video provide. Ethos also comes across differently in multimodal composition. Jeff White, for example, finds that the choice of links in websites helps construct an ethos to persuade readers to think a certain way about the writer.

Logical appeals are also impacted by the mode used. Traditional print essays, for instance, require explicit presentation of the argument, or "thesis statement," where readers are "told" the point up front and then given substantial written evidence that "proves" this main claim. Although the thesis statement is contested in scholarly conversations, it is nonetheless viewed by many to be a valued discourse feature of American writing (Heilker; Linn), perpetuated through handbooks, discipline-specific classes, and grading rubrics. The thesis statement concept has even been said to be particularly useful for teaching English cohesiveness, unity, and clarity to basic writers and English language learners (Kern and Shultz 9; Martinez-Gibson 125).

In contrast to the formulaic thesis statement of print texts, arguments in multimodal texts are less linear and explicit and more tacit in their presentation (Blair 52; Janangelo 26). While there has been some debate about whether multimodal texts can present an argument (Fleming; Blair),[2] the general view is that multimodal texts attempt to persuade by utilizing multiple layers of visuals, words, sound, and other modes to communicate claims (Sorapure). Kress and van Leeuwen, for instance, argue that in multimodal texts meaning is assigned to all of the modes deployed, and that a unified interpretation makes a cohesive argument (28). This use of multiple modes interacting at the same time gives the reader many "voices" to absorb (Walsh 35). For instance, in "Words are the Ultimate Abstraction," Cheryl Ball and Ryan Moeller analyze a published video by Robert Watkins and argue that the modes of communication (music, video, audio, and text) the author uses (e.g., remixing) afford him scholarly and creative rhetorical strategies not available with print text alone, including remixing and aesthetic approaches. This example demonstrates that multimodality affords a less linear, more implicit argument that

encourages different ways of making meaning, including reader interactivity and engagement not often afforded by print texts.

Conversations about affordances have helped us reconsider how we teach print and multimodal composition to students with a wide range of abilities we encounter in basic writing and first-year composition courses. For the most part, however, the discussions have not included the voices of students, particularly in terms of their perceptions integrating and employing modal affordances in their compositions. Scholars already perceive the potential for multimodality; however, in order to reach the full potential of multimedia in the composition classroom, we need to hear from those most impacted by these discussions about affordances and multimodal composition—our students. In this essay, then, we examine student perceptions of multimodal composing.

Study Methods[3]

To understand what students perceive as the affordances of multimodal composition, we collected pre- and post-questionnaires from fifty first-year composition students who had composed both a print and multimodal essay on the same assignment. We chose students in their first semester of college because we wanted students who might have more difficulty negotiating the demands of multimodal composition due to their lack of experience writing in college.

The students came from three different universities—Baylor University, the University of Tennessee-Martin, and the University of Louisville. While Baylor University and the University of Louisville do not have a separate, entry-level composition course for basic writers or nontraditional students, the University of Tennessee at Martin does, but these participants took the regular section of first-year composition. These students came from seven different courses

taught by four different instructors (two full-time faculty and two graduate teaching assistants). Thirty-two of the students were female and eighteen were male. Six students were African American, six were Hispanic, three were Asian American, and thirty-five were white. Seven students were over 24 years of age, and all but three reported a native language of English. Participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in both parental income and parental level of education. Three students were juniors retaking the course having failed it once before. Students' self-reported computer skill level ranged from high to low and, overall, was a little above average (2.76 on a 5-point scale). Thirty-nine students (78%) reported having no prior experience with computer editing software (audio, video, image), such as Photoshop, MovieMaker, or Audacity. Only eight students reported having composed a multimodal essay in an academic classroom prior to this study.[4]

Before beginning the first assignment, student participants completed a questionnaire that asked for demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, etc.) and prior experience with multimodal composition. Students then completed an assignment sequence in which they first profiled a person, place, or activity and then composed two different essays, one print and one multimodal, on this same subject.[5] To counterbalance the results, two instructors were asked to distribute the multimodal assignment first and the print assignment second, whereas the other two instructors were asked to give the reverse assignment sequence.[6] We defined "multimodal" according to the New London Group's definition: combining modes of meaning into a single composition (84). Following Shipka's task-based framework for composing, students were allowed to compose their multimodal essays in any medium they wished; the only requirement was that they use at least two different modes (i.e., sound and image; words and image). We chose to use the profile assignment because it utilizes primary

research, would potentially lend itself to a range of modes and mediums, and is a common

assignment in first-year composition courses.[7]

After submitting both essays to their instructors, students then completed a second

questionnaire that contained Likert-scale and open-ended questions concerning perceptions of

and experiences with print and multimodal composing. The survey was analyzed quantitatively

and qualitatively using grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss).[8]

**Potentials and Limitations of Multimodal Composition**

Students perceive both potentials and limitations in multimodal texts. The potentials

include layering, implicit persuasion, a clearer understanding of the audience, creativity, and

affective appeals; the primary limitation is difficulty in constructing a clear, well-supported

thesis. In addition, students also connect the concept of affordances to persuasion, which

suggests that students are considering and discovering the multiple tools available to them as

they compose in diverse modes. However, findings also show that students' multimodal

compositions tended to privilege appearance and surface messages rather than critical inquiry

into the complexities of the profile subject. These findings are important for basic writing

instructors looking to implement multimodal assignments in their classrooms.

Layering

One multimodal affordance students perceive is "layering," or the idea that multiple

modes function together to communicate the argument; they also view this affordance as more

persuasive than using only one mode. In fact, over 90% of students (46 out of 50) remark in the

questionnaires that layering affords additional evidence for claims, thus making claims stronger

and more persuasive. Andrew, for instance, notes, "The multimodal essay offers so many possibilities. You can incorporate video, text, and audio in order to give the audience a much stronger representation of what you are trying to say." Courtney also appreciates this affordance of layering: "An essay can be much more powerful and persuasive when more than one mode is used. The reader can see the point portrayed through pictures, sounds, and words. Words can be quite powerful alone, but when another mode is portrayed with them, the essay is even more compelling." Courtney contends that utilizing multiple modes serves to enhance and further a point and that such an essay is "more compelling," or persuasive, than text alone. When we look at Courtney's multimodal essay—a video entitled, "The Wonderful World of Wal-Mart"—we see how she utilizes many modes to layer and reinforce her argument. In Figures 1 and 2, Courtney combines sound, image, and text to support her claim that Wal-Mart cares about its customers because of its commitment to diverse products, helpful employees, and the accessible design of the store.

Figures 1 & 2: Example of Layering in Courtney's Multimodal Composition
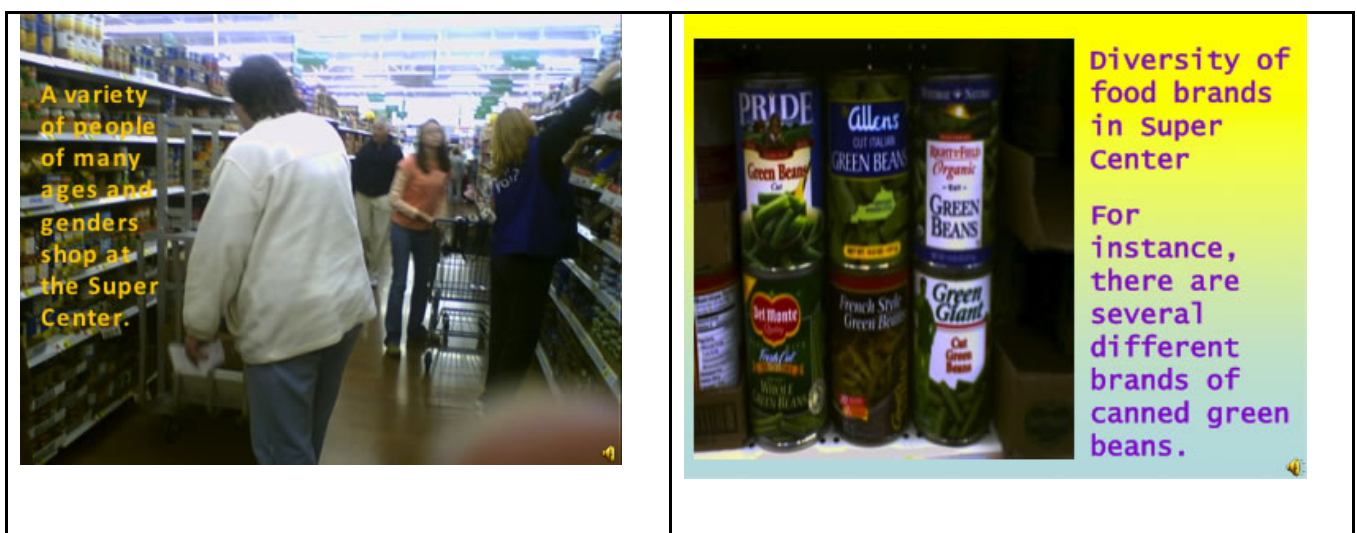
Readers will note that Courtney's profile fails to incorporate images or text that addresses potential counterarguments, including poor employee wages, sexist hiring practices, and the stores' effects on small businesses—aspects that do not make the store so "wonderful." However, by combining audio, visual, and verbal modes, Courtney uses the affordance of layering to demonstrate her point in three different ways, which she also views as persuasive.

Student opinions about the layering of multimodal texts led some students to view the theses in their print essays as being less persuasive because of a sole reliance on words. Travis, for instance, states, "I composed the print essay second after my multimodal video where I combined sound, images, and text and found it very hard to make as strong of a point. I kept wanting to incorporate other modes beyond words. Print just seemed so limiting." Carla likewise claims, "I found that what I could communicate quickly in a picture would have required pages and pages of text and descriptive vocabulary to get the same point across." In short, students view multimodal composition as utilizing the affordance of layering, which results in a more persuasive text; conversely, they perceive print texts limited to only one mode and therefore less persuasive.

Implicit Persuasion: Showing Rather Than Telling

In addition to layering, students also regard multimodal texts as more implicit in their persuasion, highlighting "showing rather than telling," a finding consistent with claims by published scholars. Whereas forty-four students (88%) express how in traditional print texts they have to state their point explicitly as a "thesis statement," thirty-two students (64%) observe that a thesis in a multimodal composition is less overt and more implicit. "Showing" rather than

"telling" is even perceived by thirty-eight students (76%) to be a more persuasive rhetorical strategy.

While discussing her multimodal scrapbook, one student, Vicki, says, "I did not need to describe certain aspects in detail because the photographs did that for me," and "I could show the reader my point." She values the implicit persuasion afforded in multimodal composition. Likewise, Deborah, who creates a collage profiling her major, speech pathology, and its impact on communities, appreciates implicit persuasion as well:

> The multimodal essay was much better at getting my point across because I was able to show more than tell readers my point. It was difficult to explain in my print essay that though these people are overridden by poverty, they kept on smiling. The pictures, however, were a great aid to my point.

Deborah uses pictures and text to "show" how her profile subject contributes to the world by helping deaf children in Africa use sign language to communicate. Her project includes images of African children smiling, holding up the "I love you" sign, and playing games with the Americans (Figure 3).

Figure 3: A Multimodal Collage "Shows" Rather Than "Tells" A Message

Although Deborah explicitly "tells" us her argument through some of the text she includes and scholars will see that the "point" Deborah is trying to get across is simplistic and uncritical (i.e., she does not question the relationships between the volunteers and the children portrayed in the photographs, or the deeper, systemic problems with poverty in the region), from Deborah's perspective, the concrete images support the verbal description and implicitly do the work of showing, thus forming a successful message. In short, students perceive implicit persuasion as an affordance of multimodal composition and a more effective rhetorical strategy than "telling," which they view as a limitation of print.

Concrete Understanding of Audience

In addition to layering and implicit persuasion, students also observe that multimodal composing affords them a more concrete audience than is available to them in print essays. All students actually mention in the questionnaires that they could envision a specific audience for the multimodal texts, whereas no student makes this point about the print essays (Indeed, only six students even mention the reader at all when referencing the print essay.). Although the students were free to respond in the questionnaire in any way they wanted, this difference between print and multimodal essays is notable. It perhaps demonstrates that students have more trouble seeing the print essay as written for an audience beyond the teacher, while the multimodal essay is written for a concrete readership students can easily imagine. Darlene's comment about her profile of an artist in her hometown demonstrates this point:

> I knew exactly what I wanted to show the reader of my multimodal essay. With the print essay, however, I could not as easily envision my audience and didn't know what I wanted the focus to be. Being able to visualize my reader really aided me in the process of composing my multimodal essay.

Although Darlene does not elaborate on what she wants to show her readers, she does point out how she appreciates the greater audience awareness afforded by multimodal essays.

In addition to perceiving the audience more concretely, students also view the audience as more involved in making meaning when reading multimodal texts, which thus allows for a wider range of interpretive and communicative possibilities. Students contend that because readers of multimodal texts are not explicitly told what to think, much of the impetus of understanding the meaning of the text is left up to the reader. Take Tom, for instance, who

profiles the Texas Ranger Museum in a video composition. He includes published quotes about the Rangers in three frames but offers no commentary on the quotes (Figures 4-6).
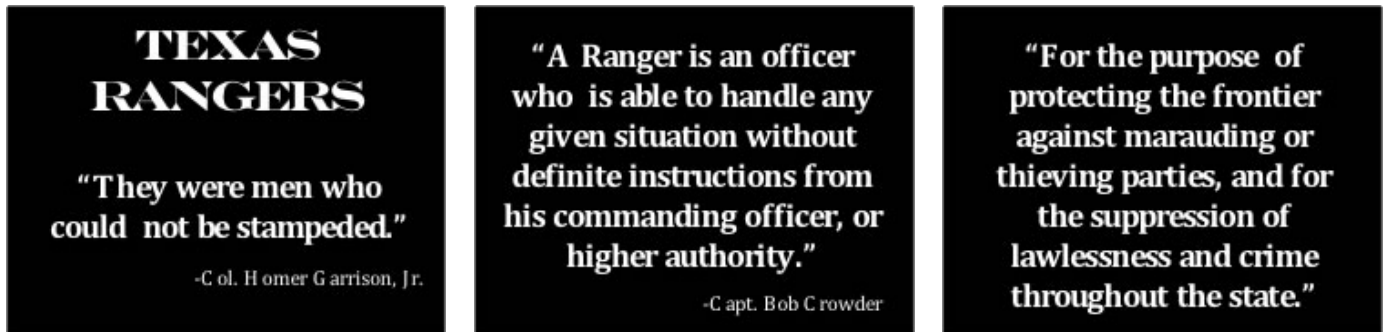
Figures 4, 5 & 6: Quotes about Texas Rangers Communicate Implied Meanings

Tom articulates the reason for his lack of explanation:

> I wanted readers to make their own interpretations about the museum and the Texas Rangers. Giving them the opportunity to interpret the images allows them to explore a multitude of meanings and learn a lot more than if they were forced to accept one dominant message in the text.

Tom consciously leaves space for his readers to interpret. Even though we might want Tom to offer an interpretation and connect these quotes to his thesis—as we would ask him to do in a print essay—the fact that he decides not to do so demonstrates that he is considering his audience and their involvement as he composes, an approach he views as more interesting and engaging.

Cindy, likewise, notices this potential of multimodal texts to engage readers. She states, "In my multimodal essay, I was able to express myself more artistically and mysteriously, allowing the reader to make his/her own assumptions without me directly telling them my opinion. I like how it left room for more interpretation, just like artwork and lyrics and poetry."

The students' discovery that readers play a key role in understanding meaning in multimodal texts indicates an understanding of audience that students do not often connect to print texts. Their heightened awareness of readers shows a potential of multimodal texts to teach audience awareness and reader-based prose in new and exciting ways.

Affective Appeals

Students also regard appeals to emotion as an affordance of multimodal texts. Over 90% of students (n=46) believe that multimodal essays convey emotion better than print essays, which thus makes the composition more engaging. Susan, for instance, believes that incorporating multiple modes offers authors greater possibilities for utilizing pathos and appealing directly to audience emotions. In her video essay, Susan employs the song "Life Is a Highway" by Rascal Flatts because she feels that "pictures and sound together allow readers to see and feel the emotions." Cindy, who profiles a homeless man named Frank in hopes of raising awareness of social issues and highlighting the superficiality of college life, especially relies on this affordance. Figures 7 and 8 highlight how in her scrapbook Cindy aims to create pathos by juxtaposing and contrasting "colorful, fun, and carefree images" from her life with harsh, bare images of her profile subject's life.

Figures 7 & 8: An Appeal to Pathos with Visual Contrasts between Pages

The visual contrast between Cindy's and Frank's pages adds emotional shock to her argument, albeit a cruel distinction: she literally takes all color out of Frank's life and thus stereotypes, marginalizes, and simplifies homelessness and homeless people. Despite issues readers might have with Cindy's representation, she still views her portrayal as appealing to emotion:

> In my scrapbook, I was able to portray my subject imaginatively and create an argument through contrast, repetition, and color. Instead of explicitly stating that Frank's life is far different than my life, I was able to show this message through contrast between pages. In the pages describing my life, I used bright colors, stickers, fun backgrounds, and cutesy phrases, which contrasted deeply with the simplicity and darkness of the pages concerning Frank. Frank's life is portrayed in black and white and the captions below the pictures are torn instead of cut with a straight edge in order to further show the difference

between the two lives. The multimodal is made with a certain shock value, meant to astonish the viewer and make him or her think more about my message.

Cindy obviously views an affordance of multimodality to be the affective, and she uses this emotion to engage the reader, even if scholarly readers find problems with her portrayal. Overall, students perceive emotional appeals as an affordance of multimodal texts.

Creativity

Students also view creativity as an affordance of multimodal texts, which is not surprising given that this was the first time many of them had created multimodal projects in an academic context. What is interesting, however, is that students view this affordance of creativity in multimodal texts as increasing audience engagement with the essay. Robin notes, "In my multimodal essay, I was able to use my creative side. I feel that the pictures made the multimodal essay more enjoyable for readers to look at, and it kept the audience wanting to find out more about the topic I was profiling."

Contrast this perceived level of audience engagement in a multimodal essay to one student's observations about a print text:

A print essay requires the author to come out and state his/her thesis in clear, plain text. By stating the argument in a straightforward manner, the author's creativity is limited and leaves little room for imagination. Without the aspect of creativity to capture the audience's imagination, the essay is dull and monotonous. Readers may read it, but they probably are not interacting with it and do not find it interesting.

This student, who composes a video essay about a popular dining hall on campus, connects multimodality to creativity and greater audience enjoyment and print to less imagination and audience engagement. Another student similarly notes, "Creating the print essay involved no creative thought. Once I got started, my fingers simply took over. I'm sure it was boring to read." In spite of these comments, it is possible that if students were provided with other overtly creative print assignments, such as short stories, poetry, or reflections, they would perceive the print assignment as "creative" in the same way they perceive multimodality as creative. What is significant here is that students are looking at an academic assignment as creative because of the modes in which it is composed.

Limitations in "Thesis"

In addition to the possibilities afforded multimodal compositions, students notice one limitation: difficulty in developing a clear thesis. Many students, in fact, expressed reservation about the quality of their multimodal argument because they were unsure how to make a clear point. Robin, for instance, who composed a scrapbook photo essay about her university's cheerleading squad, writes, "Though I enjoyed the multimodal essay the most, it was easier for me to get my point across in the print essay because I was able to give more details about the topic. In the multimodal essay, it was hard to find a way to show the thesis." This student views incorporating a thesis, adding supporting details, and making a clear point as being an affordance of the print essay, not the multimodal where one must "show the thesis."

Like Robin, Tuan views his print argument as more successful. He notes, "My print essay got the argument across more effectively. I was able to describe and include more background information in the print essay than the multimodal essay, which made my thesis clearer." Tuan's

comments indicate that he considers the verbal print mode as providing the affordances of description and details (and therefore a clearer point), while the multimodal as being more difficult in accomplishing these goals.

Michelle, too, views the lack of a thesis as a limitation of multimodal essays. She comments:

> I was able to better convey in the print essay the point I wanted the audience to comprehend. When the audience reads my multimodal scrapbook, they can take anything away from it they want. They could think many things in terms of my argument, but with the print essay I am able to tell them exactly what my thoughts are and make my point clear. The print essay was much easier to make my argument.

Michelle (who profiles a drunk-driving program at her high school) equates having a clear, direct thesis with print essays, not multimodal texts. In her print essay, Michelle inserts the following thesis into her first paragraph: "Shattered Dreams is an anti-drinking-and-driving program aimed at juniors and seniors in high school to help reinforce the idea of making responsible decisions and to save lives." She then develops the rest of her essay around that main point. Her comment that print texts allow her "to tell [readers] exactly what [her] thoughts are and make [her] point clear" suggests that she views a successful thesis in print as leaving no room for audience interpretation, which conflicts with how students tended to view multimodal compositions. In fact, in her multimodal scrapbook, Michelle does not include a one-sentence thesis that clearly states the point. Rather, she uses images of a demolished car, bodies strewn across the road, and white crosses lining a roadside, along with written text, to communicate her message to readers: drinking and driving can alter many people's lives, and you should think about the consequences

before you do it. The message is implied rather than stated directly, which Michelle views as more persuasive.

To sum up our findings, we learned that since students could not predict how readers might interpret their multimodal message, they viewed their print essays as being clearer, more straightforward, and easier to interpret while they perceived their multimodal essay as more generative, less tied to a specific interpretation, and more interesting to readers because of the potential for multiple interpretations. Students thus expressed a stronger connection to their audience in relation to their multimodal texts, yet they also expressed a preference for the clarity and safety offered by a print text.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that multimodal composition can be an excellent place for basic writers to enter the academic world. By understanding multimodal composing, students can discover the capabilities and limitations of various modes of composing. Such awareness can aid student writers as they negotiate composing in a variety of modes and mediums and give them greater confidence as they move between print and multimodal composition. While multimodal composition will no doubt be challenging for some nontraditional students, it also has the potential to be less foreign and less frightening to students who are already familiar with myriad modes and mediums. Such assignments can even help these students build their confidence by allowing them an alternate way to express their thoughts, especially when they enter our courses with the idea that they "can't write." Moreover, when instructors give students the option to choose the modes and mediums they will use to compose, students can take greater ownership of their work and see additional value in such composing.

Finally, multimodal composition provides a unique approach to teaching the rhetorical concepts of audience, purpose, and context, as well as the notion of thesis.

Discussion and Implications

Through composing, comparing, and reflecting on print and multimodal composition, students in this study became more aware of how modal affordances work to convey meaning. They realized that various semiotic modes contain unique possibilities and limitations, which make the modes particularly capable of communicating specific meanings. Through their experiences, students also recognized the diverse options they have available for composing and representing meaning in many kinds of texts. Their observations help teachers understand how first-year students perceive and approach their assignments and how they are able to distinguish modal and rhetorical possibilities depending on what type of composition they are creating. These findings also indicate that students benefit from multimodal composing in the classroom.[9]

In light of these findings, our study also shows that participants in this study viewed "creativity" as a multimodal affordance and "thesis" as a print-only affordance. We also observed that student multimodal compositions tended to be simplistic and uncritical.

Creativity as an Affordance

Students perceive creativity as an affordance of multimodal composition, while a lack of creativity is a limitation of print essays. On the surface, this conclusion is not surprising: students are excited by the newness of multimodal composition; they get to bring practices not typically associated with school into an academic setting; and they can compose in a diverse set of mediums and modes. They thus equate creativity with "choice:" the multimodal essay affords

them more choices about technologies, modes, and tools, while the print assignment limits creativity to perhaps only an original idea or vivid, descriptive words.

It seems to us, though, that these students' view of creativity as an affordance of multimodal essays is more than that. In the sense that students describe it, creativity is not about the author's level of creativity or enjoyment composing but rather about the reader's estimation of whether the essay is creative. Students thus view creativity as an important element to readers: if readers perceive a text as creative, they will be more engaged with the content. As writing teachers, we recognize that print texts relying only on words can be creative. Writing style, vivid, poetic words, and literary techniques, amongst many other written features, have been communicating creatively for centuries. Even choices of organization and argument can be creative if the writer tries something new, different, or unusual. Furthermore, if we asked students if they felt they could be creative in print, surely they would say yes—for we are all aware how written language can be creative. But, when comparing print-only to multiple modes, students consider multimodality as affording much greater creativity because it offers readers new ways to engage with the argument. From this perspective, the multimodal can be viewed as inherently more creative because it imposes fewer constraints yet requires a larger range of choices, thereby increasing the reader's perception that she is reading something new, something innovative, something creative.

Thesis as a Print-Only Affordance

Another student observation was that multimodal texts lack the affordance of a thesis statement. They view the concept of "thesis," which is fairly obvious in traditional writing settings as a verbal statement or claim, as not easily transferable to a multimodal context where

texts do not necessarily rely on substantial written evidence. This perceived difficulty seems due to the lack of an explicit thesis, or a direct statement of a claim, which they associate with good writing. Although most students find the implicit arguments in multimodal texts more persuasive, they also view the explicit arguments in print essays as clearer. This finding could be based on the commonly held student view that when something is stated directly in words, there is little ambiguity, but when many modes are used to make a point, the meaning might be more vague. Students seem to have no schema for understanding "thesis" when there is no explicit thesis statement to make and thus assume that they can present a clearer message in print. These findings suggest that the concept of thesis needs to be expanded to multimodal texts. Students may need additional instruction in how to create theses, assertions, arguments, and claims in multimodal texts because such a concept is not easily evident to them. By coming to understand "thesis" as it pertains to a multimodal text, students may also develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of thesis in print texts.

Critical Thinking

Our findings also highlight a problem that occurred in many student texts: students failed to critically examine their subjects and instead created compositions that privileged appearance and surface messages. This lack of critical inquiry may result from the profile assignment, which is not an "argument" essay in the sense of problem-solution, cause-effect, or evaluation but rather one that asks students to find a focus and make a point. The profile assignment appears to lend itself to simplistic, one-dimensional presentations rather than reasoned arguments. Our findings point to the need for future research on how students construct substantial, critical multimodal compositions.

Pedagogical Considerations

Overall, experimenting with modal affordances can teach us new ways of representing ourselves and the world. Although multimodal composition, like print composition, poses challenges for teachers and for students, we cannot ignore the value that multimodal assignments provide to a composition classroom. We were amazed at how students, even those who professed a fear of writing, were excited and motivated by the opportunity to compose in multiple modes. Furthermore, these assignments raise awareness of how various modes are used and combined to construct the messages our students absorb on a daily basis, which can help basic writing students as well as college composition and advanced undergraduates. We thus end this essay with pedagogical recommendations based on what we have learned.

First, teachers need to develop lessons on how to convey a thesis in a multimodal text, specifically in relation to modal affordances. This instruction could include analysis of multimodal texts students encounter on YouTube or television. Students could discuss a text's main idea, or the "So what?", and examine how an author constructed that main idea. Examining models of effective multimodal compositions would allow students to see how successful arguments are created multimodally. Other instructional elements might include explicit discussions of how modal affordances work to convey (or even hinder) the thesis, which would help basic writing students merge traditional composing with digital and multimodal writing.

Second, multimodal composition assignments should more explicitly state critical thinking and argument as goals. For example, instead of asking students to develop a specific focus while writing an essay, instructors could ask students to consider and possibly even present varying perspectives on the subject. Compositions could therefore examine the profile subject

from various perspectives, even if the portrayals contradict. In addition to this suggestion, these assignments need to ask for more rigorous research into the profile subject. Instead of merely interviewing and observing, a student could explore secondary sources that examine the subject. Such an approach would assist basic writing students as they come to understand the concept of context and how what one might observe or be told through interview is typically more complex and nuanced because of surrounding factors.

Third, additional activities designed to promote reasoned arguments should be incorporated into multimodal composition assignments. For example, students might be shown a still image in class, asked to interpret the image, and then challenged to draft a verbal, visual, and/or multimodal argument about the image. Students could then "read" these texts and comment on their impressions of the argument being made as well as on how they view the ethos of the writer. This activity could show basic writing students how an image can be interpreted (even misinterpreted) in many ways.

Finally, if we are going to implement multimodal composition assignments into our curricula, more instruction should be given to visual rhetoric and information design (Redish). Some of the projects featured here show an obvious weakness in design skills, particularly when combining text and images. For instance, the text in Courtney's video about Wal-Mart was difficult to read, and in Deborah's collage, the text was haphazardly cut out and lined up. We could, therefore, ask students to analyze and articulate how combinations of text, images, sound, and other modes can be used to construct a substantial argument. This type of thoughtful analysis and reflection could help students create more critical, well-rounded arguments. Being clear and explicit in our goals for multimodal composition is especially important for inexperienced

writers, such as many individuals who enroll in basic writing and college composition courses. By offering an expanded view of composing in our introductory writing classes, we can most effectively prepare our students for the increasingly complex forms of communicating that they will most assuredly encounter as they head into the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

Notes

Affordances are not necessarily exclusive to a certain mode. Comic strips, for example, present linear, sequential structures and scrapbooks can communicate the passage of time.

[2]Fleming argues that pictures cannot be arguments because they do not differentiate claims from support, while Blair maintains that a visual argument is possible as long as that argument can be verbally articulated.

[3]This study was approved by the Institutional Research Boards at Baylor University, the University of Tennessee-Martin, and the University of Louisville. All student names used here are pseudonyms.

[4]We did not ask students about their print literacy capabilities and thus cannot compare these results to those. We felt such a question would be artificial and also that students would not know how to respond if queried. While students likely had varying levels of experience composing academic prose and a range of abilities, we assumed that most would have more experience with print-based texts than with multimodal.

[5]Appendices A and B contain the assignment sheets distributed to students assigned the print essay first and multimodal second. The subject of both essays were the same, but, by design, the assignments were a bit different in that students received more information in the first assignment regarding profiling, finding a focus, and having a thesis, and the term *multimodality* was defined in the multimodal assignment. There were some accidental differences between the two assignments, which may have impacted our results. The multimodal assignment contained three additional evaluation criteria not included in the print assignment: maintains a reflective focus; uses affordances appropriate to the medium; and is a creative and analytical project.

[6]Multimodal texts are not true opposites of print texts and are affiliated with different kinds of genres and mediums. Nonetheless, we use these terms to better clarify to readers which assignment we are discussing—traditional print texts or untraditional multimodal texts. [7]Instructors were asked to discuss with students what it meant to find a focus, have a thesis (which we defined broadly as a claim, main point, or assertion), and provide reasons and evidence to support their points. They were also asked to introduce the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos; present theories of visual rhetoric, which all instructors had training in from recent graduate courses; and explain the concept of affordances, which we defined as "the capabilities and limitations of different media and modalities."

[8]An independent rater coded a random sample of the questionnaire, and the inter-rater reliability, estimated with Cohen's Kappa, was found to have strong agreement above chance ($K = .89$). [9]It is important to note that this data is based on an assignment that requires collecting and analyzing primary research and then making a focused point about this data, which could potentially be biased toward certain kinds of symbolic production. If we had collected additional data from argumentative research essays, literacy narratives, or movie reviews, or if we had not solely focused on student perceptions but had asked independent raters to analyze the affordances of the texts, this study might have yielded a different set of conclusions about affordances in multimodal texts. Future research might examine how these or other modal affordances function theoretically and practically across modes, mediums, and genres.

Works Cited

Alexander, Jonathan, and Elizabeth Losh. "Whose Literacy Is It Anyway?: Examining a First-Year Approach to Gaming across Curricula." *Currents in Electronic Literacy*. 2010. Web. 12 November 2010.

Ball, Cheryl E. "Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship." *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004): 403-25. Print.

Ball, Cheryl E., and Ryan M. Moeller. "Converging the ASS[umptions] between U and ME; or How New Media can Bridge a Scholarly/Creative Split in English Studies." *Computers and Composition Online*. (2008): n. pag. Web. 1 April 2009.

Birdsell, David, and Leo Groarke. "Outlines of a Theory of Visual Argument." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 43.3-4 (2007): 103-14. Print.

Blair, J. Anthony. "The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments." *Defining Visual Rhetorics.* Eds. Charles. A. Hill and Marguerite H. Helmers. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004. 41-62. Print.

Callow, Jon. "Images, Politics, and Multiliteracies: Using a Visual Metalanguage." *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy* 29.1 (2006): 7-23. Web. EBSCO. 11 March 2010.

DeVoss, Danielle Nicole, Joseph Johansen, Cindy L. Selfe, and John. C. Williams, Jr. "Under the Radar of Composition Programs: Glimpsing the Future through Case Studies of Literacy in Electronic Contexts." *Composition Studies in the New Millennium: Rereading the Past, Rewriting the Future.* Eds. Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald A. Daiker, and Edward M. White. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. 157-73. Print.

Fahnestock, Jeanne, and Marie Secor. *A Rhetoric of Argument*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2004.

     Print.

Faigley, Lester. "The Challenge of the Multimedia Essay." *Composition Studies in the New*

     Millennium: Rereading the Past, Rewriting the Future. Eds. Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald A.

     Daiker, and Edward M. White. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

     174-87. Print.

Fleming, David. "Can Pictures Be Arguments?" *Argumentation & Advocacy* 33.1 (1996): 11-23.

     Print.

Glaser, Barney G., and Strauss, Anselm L. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for*

     Qualitative Research. Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1967. Print.

Halbritter, Bump. "Musical Rhetoric in Integrated-Media Composition." *Computers and*

     Composition 23.3 (2006): 317-34. Print.

Heilker, Paul. *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form*. Urbana: NCTE, 1996. Print.

Hill, Charles A. "Reading the Visual in College Writing Classes." *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital*

     World: A Critical Sourcebook. Ed. Carolyn Handa. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

     107-30. Print.

Janangelo, Joseph. "Joseph Cornell and the Artistry of Composing Persuasive Hypertexts."

     College Composition and Communication 49.1 (1998): 24-44. Print.

Jewitt, Carey. "Multimodality, 'Reading,' and 'Writing' for the 21st Century." *Discourse:*

     Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education 26.3 (2005): 315-331. Print.

Keller, Dan. "Thinking Rhetorically." *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers.* Ed.

      Cynthia L. Selfe. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007. 49-63. Print.

Kern, Richard G., and Jean Marie Schultz. "The Effects of Composition Instruction on

      Intermediate Level French Students' Writing Performance: Some Preliminary Findings."

      The Modern Language Journal 76.1 (1992): 1-13. Print.

Klages, Marisa A., and J. Elizabeth Clark. "New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic

      Writers and Digital Assumptions." *Journal of Basic Writing* 28.1 (2009): 32-49. Print.

Kress, Gunther. "Design and Transformation: New Theories of Meaning." *Multiliteracies:*

      Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures. Eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis.

      New York: Routledge, 2000. 153-61. Print.

- - -. "Visual and Verbal Modes of Representation in Electronically Mediated Communication:

      The Potentials of New Forms of Text." *Page to Screen, Taking Literacy into the*

      Electronic Era. Ed. Ilana Snyder. London: Routledge, 1998. 53-79. Print.

Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of*

      Contemporary Communication. London: Arnold, 2001. Print.

Linn, Michael D. "Stylistic Variation in Vernacular Black English and the Teaching of College

      Composition." *Composing Social Identity in Written Language*. Ed. Donald L. Rubin.

      Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995. 33-46. Print.

Martinez-Gibson, Elizabeth A. "A Study on Cultural Awareness through Commercials and

      Writing." *Foreign Language Annals* 31.1 (1998): 115-39. Print.

New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard*

    Educational Review 66.1 (1996): 60-92. Print.

Rankins-Robertson, Sherry, Lisa Cahill, Duane Roen, and Gregory R. Glau. "Expanding

    Definitions of Academic Writing: Family History Writing in the Basic Writing

    Classroom and Beyond." *Journal of Basic Writing* 29.1 (2010): 56-77. Print.

Redish, Janice C. "What Is Information Design?" *Technical Communication* 47.2 (2000): 163-6.

    Print

Selfe, Cynthia L., and Pam Takayoshi. "Thinking about Multimodality." *Multimodal*

    Composition: Resources for Teachers. Ed. Cynthia L. Selfe. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton P.,

    2007. 1-12. Print.

Shipka, Jody. "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing." *College Composition*

    and Communication 57.2 (2005): 277-306. Print.

Smith, Cheryl C. "Technologies for Transcending a Focus on Error: Blogs and Democratic

    Aspirations in First-Year Composition." *Journal of Basic Writing* 27.1 (2008): 35-60.

    Web. EBSCO. 20 April 2011.

Sorapure, Madeleine. "Between Modes: Assessing Student New Media Compositions." *Kairos:*

    A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy 10.2 (2006): n.pag. Web. 15 February

    2009.

Walsh, Maureen. "The 'Textual Shift': Examining the Reading Process with Print, Visual and

    Multimodal Texts." *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 29.1 (2006): 24-37.

    Print.

Watkins, Robert. "Words are the Ultimate Abstraction. Towards Using Scott McCloud for

Teaching Visual Rhetoric." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*

12.3 (Summer 2008): n. pag. Web. 3 April 2009.

White, Jeff. "Hypersuasion and the New Ethos: Toward a Theory of Ethical Linking." *Kairos: A*

Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy 5.1 (2001): n. pag. Web. 16 March 2010.

Appendix A: Print Profile Essay

Goals

The primary goals of this assignment are for you to:

1. Practice finding a focus to your essay and then constructing a persuasive thesis;

2. Apply the characteristics of description and narration we have learned about in class;

3. Consider rhetorical elements (audience, purpose, situation, genre, context) that will impact the outcome of your project.

4. Incorporate field research (both interview and observation) into writing;

5. Learn more about our community and/or the people in it.

Assignment Overview

For this assignment, you will compose a print essay profiling a person, place, or activity in our community (our school, our city, your church, an organization, etc.) and then construct a thesis (claim, main point, assertion) about that subject. Your essay will include *primary research* where you will *go out* and research your subject, much like a reporter on an assignment, by observing, interviewing, and taking notes on your subject. You will then compile this information to form an organized essay that both informs and engages readers. You will most likely want to interview and/or observe your subject more than once.

Getting Started

The most difficult part of this assignment will be finding some aspect of the subject to focus on. It is extremely important that you *find a focus* (a theme, a significance) and construct a thesis (claim, main point, assertion) that makes some argument about this subject. You will have gathered much more information about your subject than you will use in your essay, and you must sort through all the material and find a single theme on which to focus. Avoid writing a complete biography on your profile subject, or only giving verbal descriptions about a place; rather, find an *interesting aspect* of the subject and expand on that focus by making a focused statement—a claim, thesis, main point, assertion—about it. Find meaning and significance in one important aspect of the subject and then tie this thread together to form a cohesive essay. To discover your thesis, look for the significance of the subject and find details related to this significance. Ask yourself, "What point do I want to make about this subject now that I have collected all this information?"

A Few Cautions

- Choose a subject for your profile in which you are genuinely interested and will enjoy learning more about. Don't profile someone you already know, like a family member or friend. Instead, make this a new experience for yourself so your writing is interesting.

- Observations, visits, and interviews all require planning and note-taking. You'll want to have good, open-ended questions written out before your interview.

- Don't wait until the last minute to interview and observe your subject. Your initial interview will probably need to be followed up with another interview so that your focus will not have gaps in it. Therefore, leave enough time for a follow-up interview.

Evaluation

I will evaluate your project based on the following criteria:

- Contains a thesis (main point/assertion/claim)

- Has a specific focus or theme (creates a dominant impression of the subject)

- Effectively synthesizes information rather than presents a straight reporting of facts

- Reveals the writer's attitude toward the subject and offers an interpretation of it

- Effectively incorporates the field research (interview *and* observation)

- Presents scenes/people vividly and concretely through description, action, and dialogue

- Is based on the writer's newly acquired observations of the subject

- Has evidence of careful planning

- Considers the value of the information

- Pays careful attention paid to editing and proofreading

- Fulfills all criteria for the assignment

Appendix B: Multimodal Profile Essay

Assignment Overview

This second assignment asks you to take the information you gathered from your last assignment (print profile essay) and compose a *multimodal* profile essay. For this assignment, a *multimodal* essay is one that combines two or more modes of composing, such as audio, video, photography, words, etc. into some multimodal essay (a video, website, hypertext, poster board, comic strip, scrapbook, collage, etc.). An example of a multimodal essay might be a video that integrates still images, moving images, printed words, and sound, such as music and voice-overs. Your profile subject should be the same as the one in your print essay; you are just composing the essay in a new medium. However, you may want to make a different point or have a different focus about your profile subject.

Your multimodal profile essay should also:

- Employ the affordances (capabilities and limitations) of the medium you are using in effective rhetorical ways.

- Consider rhetorical elements (audience, purpose, situation, genre, context, modes/mediums) that will impact the outcome of your project.

- Be characterized by careful design that helps to convey meaning.

Getting Started

Think about what information you want to include and whatever information you choose will determine the modes you use and the medium in which you compose. Based on these decisions, you should then consider the kind of text you want to create (scrapbook, comic strip, audio presentation, video, poster, brochure, or any other creative idea you have). Plan how you will create this document and begin collecting materials. Finally, organize your materials and draft the document.

Evaluation

I will evaluate your project based on the following criteria:

- Contains a thesis (main point/assertion/claim)

- Has a specific focus or theme (creates a dominant impression of the subject)

- Effectively synthesizes information rather than presents a straight reporting of facts

- Reveals the writer's attitude toward the subject and offers an interpretation of it

- Effectively incorporates the field research (interview *and* observation)

- Presents scenes/people vividly and concretely through description, action, and dialogue

- Has evidence of careful planning

- Considers the value of the information

- Maintains a reflective focus

- Uses affordances appropriate to the medium

- Is a creative and insightful project

- Pays careful attention to editing and proofreading

- Fulfills all criteria for the assignment

Kara Poe Alexander

Kara Poe Alexander is an Associate Professor of Professional Writing in the English Department at Baylor University.

Beth Powell

Beth Powell is Visiting Instructor of English at Tennessee Technological University

Sonya C. Green

Sonya Green is an Assistant Professor of English and director of the Writing Track at Lipscomb University in Nashville, TN.

.