Remembering Basic Composition: The Emergence of Multimodality in Basic Writing Studies

Thomas Henry, Joshua Hilst, and Regina Clemens Fox

Henry, Hilst and Fox suggest a revision of the term basic writing to increase the perceived scope of the field to include multimodal opportunities for teaching and learning. The authors define key terms related to multimodal composition and describe potential teaching and learning strategies that incorporate the visual and oral/aural.

Introduction

While many contemporary students confront the same writing challenges that Mina Shaughnessy documented in *Errors and Expectations* (Harris; Ritter), 21st century writers communicate in an increasingly digital world. Consequently, college instructors often incorporate at least some aspects of digital communication in introductory writing courses. We believe that a 21st century vision of basic writing must evolve to include digital modes of communication alongside the traditional focus on print-based literacy skills.

In their video *Remembering Composition*, Bump Halbritter and Todd Taylor argue (somewhat ambivalently) for the virtues of digital media. First, according to Halbritter and Taylor, the current popularity of digital media spells the end of composition as a field focusing solely on teaching and learning print-based writing. Secondly, they argue that we ought to *remember* that communicating in digital media is composition. While digital media and computers have largely become an *idée fixe* in composition studies, they have been slower to catch on in the realm of basic writing. How can we

incorporate digital media in our basic writing courses when students have yet to develop skills necessary for composing college essays?

In this essay, we argue that we cannot neglect our students' digital media communication needs. Forms of new media are already fundamental in our students' lives. We should therefore shift from a narrowly print-based view of basic writing to a more inclusive field of "basic composition." The argument is not new. The discipline of composition and rhetoric is structured around *composition*--a completely different term than *basic writing*. Composition and rhetoric is also no stranger to arguments in favor of technology. A panoply of scholars have argued—for the better part of two decades—in favor of the fundamental inclusion and reflective use of technology in composition classrooms. Debates about how and when to utilize technology in college writing courses are in fact central to composition and rhetoric scholarship. Unfortunately, discussions of how and when to use new media are far less prominent in basic writing. Relying on scholarship in new literacy studies and theories proposed by Gunther Kress and The New London Group, we argue for shifting our collective focus on teaching and learning new media from the margins to the mainstream of a field that we would rename *basic composition*.

Shifting from Basic Writing to Basic Composition

Word processing changed college composition. This new technology allowed students the ability to write, review, rewrite, spell-check, and grammar-check documents automatically. At some point, basic writing instructors had to rethink how to grade, approach teaching writing with technology, and adapt to the benefits and hazards of these technologies. Furthermore, with the advent of the Internet and online technologies, many instructors have had to confront related challenges (e.g., plagiarism and

internet-based research) and reconsider their approaches to teaching basic writing. However, while some basic writing instructors are revising their assumptions about teaching and learning writing in a digital era, these same instructors are often still required to rely on "handwritten materials" for assessment. Moreover, despite the efforts of some instructors to adapt to 21st century modes of communication, many instructors continue to rely on paradigms rooted in former decades. And they keep talking about Mina Shaughnessy. At this point in time, our discipline is uncomfortably poised between the old and the new. Is this balancing act outmoded?

Our answer: Absolutely not. While we continue to face the traditional challenges of basic writing assessment, placement, and pedagogy, we are watching our students adapt to current technologies and expand their communication options. However, more focused attention to these new communication modes is needed as we prepare our students for higher level "composition" courses, which are increasingly devoted to multimodal composing practices necessary for industry and social engagement. So what sorts of rhetorical and strategic moves will basic writing make within the first half of the 21st century? Will we hold on fervently to the ideologies and behaviors of the past? Or, will we let the technologies of the future push us forward into the teaching of new skill sets and new approaches to teaching and learning course content? We believe that our field should move confidently towards the future rather than holding back for fear of something new.

Embracing "something new" includes incorporating digital media in our writing curricula but can also involve a stronger focus on learning theory and research. Recent brain research may offer information relevant to our concerns as educators. Education scholar Suzy Cox has recently noted that students raised with digital technology can also have brains wired differently as a result of a lifetime of

engaging with the digital world. Cox explains that this can lead to young brains evolving faster than any brains in our human history. However, there are also drawbacks that we teachers of basic composition need to know about. These digital natives (as students) can have a more superficial approach to communication (and even composition for that matter), which is where we can help them most. But to do that, we have to meet these students where they are, i.e., within their digital comfort zones.

Most of our digital native students will respond more favorably to our teaching strategies if we help them build on what they already know, which includes multiple ways of composing in multiple modes of communication. We must also help them to penetrate academic codes and find opportunities to enter a continuous conversation that is both like and unlike their own everyday communications.

We contend that we should not be circumscribed by the more traditional conception of *writing*. That is, as teachers we have a responsibility to teach students to read, to write, and to communicate in ways that allow them to participate in civic society. We all communicate in multiple modes, including reading and writing print-based text, text-messaging, social networking, and using Internet, video, audio, radio, television, visual images, and cinema. Considering how much most peoples' days are filled with these various modes of communication, it makes little sense that we teach students to read and write in only one mode: written, print-based text. We should therefore expand our notion of *basic writing* beyond the boundaries of print-based literacies. The term we use to define what we do should include understanding and making meaning with all or as many of the contemporary modes of communication as are available, including digital media.

Now is the time to recreate our discipline in the likeness of the contemporary student, a person who is asked for products and processes beyond the text-based page; a person who must know more

than how a pen moves across a few pieces of paper or how a typewriter or keyboard moves a cursor from left to right; a person who must know more about formatting, style, grammar, and punctuation than ever; a person who has the means to access data faster than one can insert paper in a typewriter; a person who must evaluate sources; and, a person who must know about the visual world, the aural world, and the written/printed word in order to make sense of everyday communications.

Students face increasingly perplexing issues of composing college discourse: formatting papers in the source documentation system, using word processors, locating sources online, extracting quotes from online sources, answering the call of learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas, etc.), and learning to assess the visual as well as the textual for longer writing assignments. Our courses are not necessarily delivered in a conventional lecture format, but delivered by a wide range of methods engaging multiple intelligences and multiple learning styles (e.g., the visual, the aural, and the textual). Our traditional courses are now supplemented by technology, whether they are hybrids or fully online. Thus, engaging students in multiple modes is almost necessitated by changes in educational delivery.

Embracing Change: An Introduction to New Media and Multimodality

Many composition and literacy scholars have been recently talking about composition as multimodal, as encompassing more than just print-based written texts (see Daley, Delagrange, Kress, Selfe and Takayoshi, and The New London Group). As we consider the importance of this emerging discussion of modes in composition, we understand teaching of developmental skills and suitable content (for our student's reading abilities) is often specifically geared towards creating "basic writing"; however, since our composition contemporaries are talking about multimodality and composition, it is

imperative for us to enter into such conversations. Likewise, embracing the diversity of communicative media in our discipline is important.

In order to move basic writing students into the world of new media (the contemporary form of the term "multimedia"), we must embrace multimodal forms of knowing and communicating. To recapitulate this trend for those who are new to it, the term *multimodality* refers to the idea that a form of discourse exhibits multiple ways in which a message is expressed, interpreted, and received. Noted scholar Gunther Kress suggests, "All texts are multimodal…." ("Multimodality" 187). Any multimodal text might combine elements of bodily gestures, including movement, posture, or facial expression. Most obviously, multimodal composition involves images, both moving and still, real and drawn. Sound is also a part of multimodality, including spoken words, sound effects, and music. Lastly, and perhaps less obviously, various aspects of writing are multimodal, including font and typography (Bearne & Wolstencroft 2).

In this sense, written texts (like all media) have material properties that are textual but also visual. Our eyes read and transcribe visual characters that communicate meaning. To this end, if a text is supplemented with other communicative properties (media or modes), the text may become more powerfully rhetorical (in terms of persuasion and appeals to audience).

Here are some important terms for understanding multimodality:

Modes refer to the communicative practices that are primarily used: speaking, writing, making gestures, or designing visuals. Kress admits, "Modes offer specific orientations to the world… [they offer] the material signs of stuff" when we consider the semiotic value of meaning (*Multimodality*, 82-83).

Medium/Media refer to the communicative medium or method of delivery: paper, pen, pencil, screen, film, etc.

Affordance/s refer to the material/social/theoretical features that allow the mode to appear on the medium/media, making the message appear to the reader/user/viewer. For example, images use the affordances of space and the logic of space (Kress, *Multimodality*, 82). Each mode (whether visual, written, spoken, or gestured) may have a particular logic, grammar, syntax, format, techniques, and even rhetorical advantages/disadvantages.

Given these ideas about modes of communication, why is multimodality important? Consider how one reads an essay as opposed to how one views a documentary. And think about how much our eyes and other senses pick up in an oral exchange, where we rely on gestures and expressions (of the face) to perceive the messages of others. Likewise, if we reflect on the printed essay versus the film documentary, we can recognize that while it is one thing to read about the suffering or joy of others, it is quite another to see how the suffering or joy of others appears in a visual image.

In mainstream composition, teachers and scholars are moving towards reclaiming simple ideals lost in the myopic focus on writing. Academics are realizing that print-based writing (as a mode) is becoming only one form of communication among many within the world of evolving technologies. Readers/audiences are now "reading" multimodal/multimedia texts via small screens on laptops, cell phones, and desktop computers. We are learning new forms of English composed entirely of interactions between the visual, the written, and the aural/oral. "College writing" is renewing itself as "multimodal composition," a new form of composition referring to multiple modes of delivery—the oral, the written,

and the visual. We live in a new and complex world of emerging technologies, networks (social, cultural, and technological), and information systems.

Given the persistence of the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric (as available means of persuasion), it is not a stretch to consider that available means have changed significantly with the introduction of multimodal technologies. In order to be competitive, students need to learn how to analyze and articulate messages through the range of modes and mediums, while considering an abundance of affordances. While paper may not go the way of the dodo bird, paper texts are merging with modern technology to create texts that are interactive and more visually dependent. For example, we have new technologies such as e-paper (e.g., the PDF), which not only provide text (readable and printable), but also provide links to other texts within a single page.

Multimodality: Communication and Instruction

One of the most important things about multimodality is that it works in two interesting ways: First, as a *method of communication*, used to deliver messages and interpret the messages of others. For example, a student completes a written paper and gives an oral presentation of its contents, a student creates a documentary based on a written paper, or a student creates a flow chart or a poster to deliver content. Or, quite often, students use all of the above. Secondly, it works as an *instructional method* (where an instructor can use ideas/practices in multimodality to deliver content), such as when the instructor shows students a digital slideshow in addition to a lecture. A teacher may create a movie about a topic and ask the students to view the movie during class time or ask students to record themselves in order to hear how they speak or how they read.

In adding teaching multimodality in our courses, we can preserve certain "basics" of writing, including (but not limited to) grammar, punctuation, writing processes, style, formatting, research, and other "traditional" components of the writing class. However, we also need to embrace the teaching and interpretation (or analysis) of the visual and the aural. Granted, we are not teaching art or music or even a full speech class. But we need to be mindful of the inclusion of such skills, as the propensity to encounter rhetorical tendencies in these areas and in these modes/mediums increases exponentially. Moreover, we need talk to our colleagues and our students about how interactions of these forces within simple word-processing and desktop document creation (or desktop publishing) are needed rhetorical skills in a visual world.

Within the new multimodal composition are two significant modes affecting college composition and communication (aside from the written): They are the *visual* and the *oral/aural.* At Utah Valley University, members of the Department of Basic Composition[1] have been working diligently on ways to incorporate introductory lessons in multimodality (as a means to prepare students for work in higher-level English courses and other courses taken concurrently with our courses). The following sections help to define the types of content faculty have added to traditional content for the purpose of introducing students to the modes of visual and the oral. We are supporting higher-level coursework, and we are supporting our basic students with foundational skills in computer usage (perhaps one of the most significant areas of need for Basic Writers in this decade). For we are all aware of those non-traditional students who still permeate our courses. Many of these non-traditional students are unaware of the basic computing needed to work with a word processor or even to complete the task of simply turning on the computer, using the internet, etc. Let us not forget that such tasks are pivotal and intrinsic

to those needed in higher-level coursework, especially as courses like mainstream composition look towards expanding their mandate to include digital compositions with visual components.

The changing face of composition alone is not an impetus for our proposed change in the field. On our campus, several administrative and community forces are contributing to the necessity of adopting multimodal composition practices (which have ultimately affected our program in basic writing and reading): Our administration has advocated for our instructors to teach more technology (as a foundation for basic computing). Furthermore, students must create posters, slide presentations, digital documents, and charts for various activities and courses. Problematically, these students have no specific class in order to learn such necessary activities as interpreting visuals, basic graphic/chart design, and formatting/laying out such multimodal texts. If they are to be successful in these endeavors, students need to learn appropriate methods of communication that make use of these technologies, which are increasingly essential material for writing. Moreover, because of various educational demands, students need to learn technologies in order to produce multimedia/multimodal works required by particular instructors and courses.

Teaching Multimodality: The Visual

As recent veterans of the inclusion of such content and pedagogy, we can offer several suggestions. For instance, when introducing students to the multimodal, start with a short introduction to the visual. Begin with a discussion of how visuals are constructed and designed. When learning the creation and analysis of visuals, students need a vocabulary. We generally teach some basic affordances of the visual (the grammar, syntax, and logic of visuals).

Such basic affordances might include certain key visual terms, which we will discuss here only briefly. The concepts of **foreground** and **background** show dynamic relations between an image given pride of place in a visual document and surrounding images, which often contrast with the central image. **Typeface** relates to the realm of the written but is another important visual consideration. **The size of objects relative to each other** is another important visual cue, as it suggests importance and relation between objects. **Levels of heading** serve as the basic way for scanning a document in order to determine hierarchy of topics. **Placement and layout of objects and type** show hierarchy while serving as a guide for the eye. The **use of colors** is a simple way of connoting emotion, feeling, and mood. **Spacing** helps the eye to perceive what should come first (for instance, an image with an increased amount of space surrounding it will draw more attention). **Contrast** (of type, color, size, shape, or other) helps to convey opposing ideas in a visual, while **proximity**, or grouping items of similar objects & type, will tend to link ideas together. **Repetition/Similarity of objects & type** is a basic way of providing consistency across a series of visual documents, especially instructional documents, or it can also help to convey an idea. **Symmetry** and **asymmetry** are methods of achieving or disrupting balance and harmony in an image, both to rhetorical effect. While this is by no means an exhaustive list, it does serve as a sort of primer for visual terminology. The sort of terminology we are advocating here can be used as a means of analyzing visuals in a basic composition classroom.

Here are some popular ideas for presentations on uses of visuals in a writing classroom: Discuss visual argumentation. Knowledge of visual arguments is key to negotiating texts in and outside of the academy. A simple activity for students is a discussion of magazine covers with special attention to audience and visual arguments presented (e.g., Who is the audience? How do we know? What is the

claim of this magazine cover? How do we know?). Knowledge of persuasive strategies is pivotal as an introduction to understanding argumentation (both textually and visually).

Instructors can also ask students to consider how a picture/chart may be more effective than text for some audiences. Oftentimes, one of our colleagues begins his class with a few simple visual lessons. He asks students to write a short, general description of a car. After students compose the description, he asks them to draw a car. His students then compare the task of writing about a car with the task of drawing a car. Frequently, students conclude that drawing a car, while complicated, is much easier than describing a car. An alternative is to ask students to provide directions to their homes (or to a local business from campus). Subsequently, students draw maps to these destinations.

Instructors may also ask students to consider different interpretations of visual representations. An interesting picture from another culture (perhaps even an advertisement) can be displayed for student response and discussion of various possible meanings. Some short films and visual argumentative pieces contain metaphorical or metonymic properties. For example, a popular Pixar short film, *For the Birds*, presents a group of smaller birds maliciously engaging with an awkward larger bird. If we ask the students how such a situation is similar to the human condition, students may explore the connection between the film and representations of human social interaction. Developing a familiarity with these concerns and their applications can help us to teach basic writers how to create and analyze multimodal texts.

Teaching Multimodality: The Oral/Aural

After discussing the visual, instructors can discuss speech and sound. Speech, sound and even music are often overlooked modes of communication in composition. To prompt a discussion of their

importance, an instructor might ask students to imagine a film without music or a film without words. After providing a brief description of the foundations of speech (the affordances of the spoken word), including content and its organization, inflection, tone, pitch, non-verbal gestures, tempo, rhythm, and pauses/ stops/ breaks of sound, an instructor can explain gestures as affordances in speech (and *vice versa*). Gestures are, in fact, their own mode, and may include such bodily actions as gestures, behaviors, breathing, posture, positioning, and movement.

Finally, since some sounds may be connected to tones or some form of tonality (such as music), it's useful to provide a brief description of the affordances of tonality, such as melody, harmony, rhythm and beat, tone, pitch, and tempo. Then, we might expand these into discussions of how speech, sound, and tones may be used rhetorically to persuade and inform. Some activities appropriate for basic writers might include discussions of how writing and speaking are different, the advantages of talking and speaking vs. the advantages of writing. We sometimes invite students to listen to a few audio documentaries and then discuss the process of composing audio documentaries and how that compares to composing their written texts. We might also allow students to record a documentary based on a text written for class (particularly argumentative texts). Lastly, we ask students to present the contents of their paper orally as well as in paper form.

The Future of Basic Writing as Basic Composition

During this past year's Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), basic writing was snubbed. In "Basic But Vital" Golden reports on the fact that basic writing was poorly represented at CCCC 2011. Golden further notes that CBW members felt marginalized within CCCC 2011. The "reduced visibility" of basic writing studies in the professional community may in part be

attributed to conference planning; however, such oversights may be signaling that it is time to change our identity as simply writing teachers to composition teachers, or more specifically, basic composition teachers.

Now is the time to address the inadequacies of the term *basic writing* and the limitations it imposes on instructors and students. We need to align ourselves more closely with the multimodal and digital literacy dimensions of composition and rhetoric. Otherwise, we may well suffer the fate of basic writing programs in institutions that no longer support full-fledged basic writing programs, especially those mired in the past as print-based literacy instruction providers. We need to change, adapt, and move forward confidently as writers, readers, and instructors in a digital world.

Notes

1. The Department of Basic Composition at Utah Valley University still retains a "basic writing and basic reading" mission; our courses are titled similarly. Recently, our department has been charged with a "Composing in Electronic Environments" mission for the entire university, which includes teaching basic computer use, teaching basic design of charts and graphs, and other nuances of the multimodal movement. However, our program is not very unique, since so many "basic composition" courses are mainstreamed as lower-level composition department courses. For example, other colleges/universities use the term "basic composition" (synonymous with "basic writing") for their course titles (and possibly departments titles). These colleges and universities include Rutgers University, California State-Sacramento, Community College of Philadelphia, Waubonsee Community College, Indiana University-Bloomington, Delgado Community College, Mississippi State University, Pikes Peak Community College, Illinois Valley Community College, Illinois Central College, and Red Rocks Community College.

Works Cited

Bearne, Eve, and Wolstencroft, Helen. *Visual Approaches to Teaching Writing: Multimodal Literacy 5-11*. London: Sage, 2007. Print.

Cox, Suzy. "Engaging the Digital Mind." 3rd Annual Scholarship of Teaching and Engagement Conference. Orem, UT. 25 Mar. 2011. Lecture.

Daley, Elizabeth. "Expanding the Concept of Literacy." Educause Review, 38.2 (March-April 2003): 33-40. Print.

Delagrange, Susan. "When Revision is Redesign: Key Questions for Digital Scholarship." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 14.1 (Fall 2009): n.pag. Web. 10 April 2011.

Golden, Serena. "Basic, But Vital." *Inside Higher Education*. Inside Higher Ed. 11 April 2011. Web. 12 May 2011.

Halbritter, Bump, and Todd Taylor. "Remembering Composition." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*.26.3-4 (2006). DVD format, 75 minutes. 2007.

Harris, Joseph. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1996. Print.

Kress, Gunther. *Literacy in the New Media Age.* New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

---. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.

---. "Multimodality." *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. Eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. London: Routledge, 2000. 182-202. Print.

The New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Education Review* 66.1 (1996): n.pag. Web. 17 May 2012.

Ritter, Kelly. *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard 1920-1960*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. Print.

Selfe, Cynthia L., and Pamela Takayoshi. *Multimodal Composition: A Resource for Teachers.* New York: Hampton Press, 2007. Print.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.

Thomas Henry

Thomas Henry is an Assistant Professor of Basic Composition at Utah Valley University.

Joshua C. Hilst

Joshua C. Hilst is Assistant Professor of Basic Composition at Utah Valley University.

Regina Clemens Fox

Regina Clemens Fox is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Composition at Oklahoma City University.