Welcome e-Burdens: New Media Projects in the Basic Writing Classroom

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Lay examines the role of multimodal composition in influencing basic writers' perspective on writing and fostering their agency in and facility with composing. The author concludes that opportunities for multimodality in the basic writing classroom help students to both challenge traditional forms they may mistrust, articulate an individual understanding of composing as a process and successfully complete assignments in a variety of rhetorical modes.

This is a cautionary tale about offering students the option of crafting multimodal projects in first-year composition and basic writing classes. Such projects have made me somewhat weak in the knees, because they have required that I let go of an assignment′s center and yield authority to my students' independent decision-making. In theory, I am aware of the advantages of decentering the classroom, but in practice, I am dizzy from letting students take control of their own learning, especially when their choices involve multimodal compositions. This angst often results from what I term an electronic burden, an *e-burden*, in that it is a worry promulgated by the use of electronic or digital new media assignments in the classroom.   Seemingly benign technological tools become burdensome when they interrupt the sequence of a composition course, baffling student and instructor alike while usurping time from other activities that are potentially more productive.

I contend that multimodal composing opportunities should be afforded to students enrolled in basic writing courses. I also maintain that while basic writers may make meaningful new media productions, they need to learn ways to articulate the essence of those projects more precisely. In fact, composing a new media project may directly support learning to compose written words. However, even if does not, even if it detracts from the time spent writing in a composition class, writing teachers should still integrate new kinds of writing and argumentation in their class assignments: contemporary students

live, study and work in a 21st Century digital era--a world in which they increasingly read and write using new media rather than 20th Century print-based technologies.

For the purposes of my argument--that multimodal compositions are appropriate choices for basic writing classes--I will draw on the theory of remediation as presented by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Bolter and Grusin opine that it is the nature of visual digital expressions to refashion earlier visual media (55). Their theory can be applied to basic writers who frequently remediate their compositions, especially if they are invited initially to make visual arguments.

Characterizing the traits by which new media refashion or reconstitute old media, Bolter and Grusin delineate a genealogy of new media. The first two of these traits, transparent immediacy (lacking awareness of form) and hypermediacy (the highlighting of form), seem contradictory (53). However, they work together companionably, even in novice new media compositions. Initially, new media composers are compelled to erase the tracks of their creations by denying the presence of the media (56-61). Bolter and Grusin call this *transparent immediacy*, which is the composer's attempt to have the audience participate fully in the media event, as if it were an actual, lived experience. The second trait is *hypermediacy*, which is the composer's deliberate showcasing of the media form (31). Frequently, hypermediacy functions as a type of rhetorical boasting about the composer's expert handling of the media--the composer's nod to the excellence of the refashioning (or remediation) in the older media. These two features--transparent immediacy and hypermediacy--can often be observed in students' new media projects.

In the project described here, a primary video presentation is revisited and overlaid with audio commentary intended to explicate or analyze the choices of the collaborators. Reflection by means of reiterating ideas presented in a text can help basic writing students progress toward more effective written expression. However, this aim is not always achieved by students working with new media compositions.

Sometimes, the second interpretation (the explication of rhetorical choices) is reductive or less valuable, illustrating another e-burden: a commentary about the production is sometimes less communicative than the initial production itself. Moreover, in new media, using the double strand of transparent immediacy and hypermediacy does not guarantee that successful expression of meaning will follow. In fact, my students never write about their new media presentation. This absence of a written composition leads to questions about assessing the new media compositions and the pedagogical time lost or displaced by developing such compositions.

Considering the relationship between text and new media, Bolter and Grusin claim that all new media appear to remake or remediate old media. They carefully distinguish between the use of "remediation" as remedial or curative and their adoption of the term *remediation* "to express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another" (59). On one hand, students may regard their new media projects as improving on the old media of writing. On the other hand, producing multimodal compositions may inhibit students' written expression. If students experience success with multimodal composing, they might devalue written expression.

This ambiguity is the crux of the puzzle that I have witnessed: my students' visions of suitable topics for composition have reformed (and re-formed) my own. Their responses can be disconcerting because they take such diverse forms, but they are often quite interesting. In fact, their seeming fragmentation of form offers students opportunities to represent their ideas in alternative, non-textual forms.

Some questions remain: Is it possible to use new media compositions to lead basic writers to textual composing? Does this pedagogical strategy warrant the time and the burden for students and instructors? This strategy ultimately positions students as confident digital leaders committed to working in new media. Their confidence and their composing is burdensome in that the instructor must step away

from the podium, but it empowers students to write to new audiences and to receive feedback from those audiences.

In contrast to instructors, some students do not entrust writing with the capacity to embody or convey knowledge. This is in part due to the times in which we live, what some have called "the late age of print" (Bolter 3; Striphas 3; Birkerts 3-7). This argument is not really about the decline of literacy but is instead about understanding and coming to terms with a shifting paradigm for students' views of writing (Yancey 298-299). Although students may not value textuality, they do embrace other means of representing what they know to be true. Ultimately I argue that students have relegated the written essay to the margins of communication, assigning the essay the role of gloss or explanatory note. Students who privilege visual and aural modes to express themselves benefit from pre-writing strategies that capitalize on their non-textual capabilities. By preferring new media as a primary means of expression, students have resituated the essay as a secondary communication, a companion with less authority.

This genre-flexing of writing assignments, of writing pedagogy, can be likened to the way a hypotrochoid curve is formed by the rotation of interlocking disks. Take, for example, the Spirograph--a drawing game or device that allows a young artist the capability to create geometric patterns or roulettes by using a series of gears in conjunction with a fixed frame. By inserting a pen into a toothed wheel, a child can make a series of curves or ellipses whose center is constantly changed or displaced. Success is dependent upon a steady hand, continuous movement matched with even pressure, and a great deal of patience. It is an awkward process, but the possibilities of the resultant layered curves are intriguing; the procedure sometimes forms rosettes, off-kilter fireworks, and the all-too-frequent half finished, marred productions, which are somehow pleasing in ways difficult to explain. The Spirograph functions by having a smaller wheel fit inside or outside the larger ring, rotating around the interior or along the exterior. In some ways, it is a perfect model for the instructor-writer exchange; the smaller leans on the

greater in order to make a masterpiece, and yet it is not always clear who is driving the curve. Neither is it always apparent what shape will be manifested as a result of completing the process.

Forming new patterns, basic and first-year writing students draft roulettes around fixed forms and in so doing, they push composition curricula in new directions. They redirect the sequence of writing instruction and circle around traditional rhetorical modes. They legitimize the disruption by responding that they can best articulate their ideas via visual, aural, and non-textual means. Indeed, when we ask students to compose or to make a composition, what do they hear? When writers compose, what ultimately are they making? Are the graphs they combine and recombine phonographic, close representations of sound or symbolic, visual systems? In order to communicate most effectively, basic writers must develop greater consciousness of their own rhetorical identities and expressive capabilities.

In *The Two Virtuals*, Alexander Reid theorizes that composition studies might benefit substantively from "understanding how thought mutates through its connection to the development of symbolic behavior (the use of sign systems either spoken or gestural)" (22). This idea is particularly relevant to basic writers who have downplayed their own participation in writing and textual composition. As digital media redefine what writing is and what it can do, writing and reading practices change as well. Consider the fact increasingly, young adult student writers relate thought to non-textual symbols (e.g., icons used in computer applications); for this reason, the introduction of multimodal composing that combines images and text can be especially compelling for young adult students. Once they become involved in their own multimodal composing, they may well become motivated to acquire greater expertise as readers and writers of text.

Given its original dependence on spoken language, writing has been construed by some linguists as secondary to spoken language and artificial. Now given digital capabilities to reproduce spoken language, twenty-first century students are writing texts that resemble spoken discourse and also combining speech sounds and text in their compositions. This mixing of forms creates an ambiguity that

is exacerbated further by the digital culture of contemporary students and their status as "digital natives" (Prensky 2001). Cynthia Selfe asks teachers of composition to consider carefully how "such [new media] texts are changing are understanding of what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century and help us understand our own role in relation to change" (4).

Oftentimes, students, especially inexperienced writers, seem attuned to the intrinsic ambiguity of written expression. Reflecting on a peer tutorial, a first-year student in my class expresses her frustration with what she perceives as the impossibility of representing her ideas in writing. When asked what she might address in her composition's revision, she confides, "I have to just make it more interesting . . . I kept thinking he [the peer reader] must be bored out of his mind . . . I mean I was bored by it. This is an awful paper. Please don't judge me by this. I swear I am more interesting." In class, after hearing the aural read-back of her writing, the student acknowledges the limits and incompleteness of her written expression. She is bored by her own representation. Visually, she could not perceive what her writing lacked, but when hearing her text read orally, she *could* perceive areas of weakness. Other students found similar results, often citing their peers' abilities to explain their ideas out loud but not in writing. This is why the use of a digital voice recorder to provide first feedback (as audio read-back) to the writer is quite effective in demonstrating the disparity between these competencies.

Introducing audio-recordings of student voices even earlier into a basic writing experience can further facilitate invention, composing and revising activities. To support this claim, I'd like to introduce a recent example of the dis-connect that I experienced with two of my first-year students about fulfilling the criteria of a writing assignment.

I often assign a very open-ended final assignment to my first-year writing students. Students may opt to compose their final essays in a new media format. In the past, students interpreted the assignment as ultimately text-based – that is, those who opted to make their arguments via new media would write an

essay first and then create an accordant media presentation. This assignment worked fairly well until recently when two students collaborated on an unusual project.

In this instance, two basic writers collaborated on a final essay, which they composed in video. The first production was beautifully executed, but the students seemed to have followed some other direction. They crafted a music video relevant to the spirit of the essay assignment. Their presentation was completely non-textual–that is to say, it included no written language, except isolated words from the song's lyrics. And yet, as I viewed the production, I knew the students had formulated a fitting response to my question. I asked them to apply their notions about the American fairy tale to a member of the university community (e.g., a fellow student) in the context of the work of Bruno Bettelheim (23-28) and Jack Zipes (139-161). Their video essay responded effectively to the prompt. The situation remained problematic though.   How could I assess this kind of presentation as equal to a written presentation meant to fulfill the objectives of a first-year English composition course? Their work was not writing, but it responded appropriately to the assignment question.

Time was quickly running out on the semester, and I needed more data about their composition and composing practices. Actually, what I stubbornly persisted in believing was that I needed a written composition. I decided to ask them for a reflection or commentary which included discussion of the supporting texts. What they produced next was similarly not written.   They made an audio directors' commentary and superimposed it over their first composition. While they had produced two versions of their argument, as video and as audio, they resisted composing in writing.

The importance of the students' decision to craft a directors' commentary in lieu of a written reflection is very telling. First, it is clearly evidence of the kind of hypermediacy, the super-awareness of the form (Bolter and Grusin 53), that these students have made an alternate non-textual response – a video essay in lieu of a traditional text essay. They have remediated the form of the assignment first by substituting a video essay and secondly by supplying a directors' commentary with no textual

composition. Secondly, the frame of the directors' commentary is quite interesting. It opens with the two filmmakers walking down a corridor toward the camera. It is through this frame that viewers must regard the composers. They adopt the disinterested posture of composers who are not necessarily vested in their own work. Following a salutation, they announce: "This is our film. And believe it or not, we really enjoyed working on it." This admission sets the tone for the rest of their commentary. On one hand, they narrate confidently what they have presented; on the other, they deny any true understanding of or commitment to what they have prepared. Their commentary is directed toward a student audience whom they feel will respond empathetically to their playful disavowals.

Although these two students enact a serious tone at times, they do not sustain an informed discussion of their own composition. They seem reticent to commit to their own choices about the beautiful, significant video that they have made. They make an aborted attempt to explain the impetus or exigency for the protagonist's quest:

LM: For this scene, we were trying to get Rob's anxiousness to get to the library . . . to study calculus.

ML: As you can see, we're trying to capture the theme – he's not motivated at all to study . . . as in Hansel and Gretel, they just stumble upon the house.

LM: Actually, in Hansel and Gretel, their motive is to get home, but . . .

ML: Yeah.

LM: They don't get there. You can kind of compare that he doesn't want to get there – they don't want to get home. At first, at first.

ML: It looks like you read the story.

LM: I kind of did. I glanced at it.

The students do not make a complete or sustained analysis of the moment instigating the student's quest. Their review is partially obstructed by nonsensical framing, but the narrow window into their competence as meaning makers is fruitful. Their commentary reflects the notion that any child's ultimate quest is to regain home (Cashdan 252; Zipes 127-128). In order to succeed at this quest, the college student must best the assignment or examination, earn a university degree, and guarantee a future livelihood. Finding home or a new home necessarily follows suit.

Nonetheless, the student's denial of his preparedness is clearly a posturing of disinterest. His seeming lack of engagement could be interpreted as a strategy used to endear him to his audience, his fellow students. Another possibility is that the student is acknowledging the instructor as audience. By claiming not to have read the assignment guidelines, he communicates that he is not responsible for his presentation. His failure is a failure of commitment, not of intellect. Either way, this is an analytic, creative, iterative moment that is not fulfilled. Although the multimodal composition is effectively researched, planned, and presented, the companion reflection is abortive.

In another significant moment, the composers discuss the protagonist-student's traversal of the university unispan, which is a bridge over a multi-laned turnpike that connects the north and south sides of campus. This is a brilliant choice on the composers' part, for the crossing over is both actual and symbolic. In order to embark on his quest, the student must leave the dormitory, his campus home, to continue a quest in the library. In a very effective use of slow motion, the protagonist's motion is retarded. In the commentary, one composer provides warbled, non-verbal sound effects without offering any verbal insight, e.g., there is no reflection of Zipes' disillusion about the impossibility of utopian quests in contemporary America (140-142) and no remark upon Cashdan's rubric outlining the requisite conflicts of fairy tale quests (31-38). Instead he resorts to non-verbal, derisive cues, which demonstrate his fascination with what they have produced. This, too, indicates hypermediacy, for the composer is compelled to enhance the production with additional sound effects. This is evidence that he has little or

no interest in expressing the video moment's significance in language. The slow motion must stand as itself. There is no accompanying analysis. The absence of commentary may indicate the student's deferral to the video as a sort of hypermediacy encapsulate. Clearly, the student believes, the slowed movement speaks for itself.

In another important exchange, the composers quip about the close up of the protagonist's hand, as he drags it across the bridge's rail.

LM: We cut to his hand here - because that shows the significance of - I don't even know why -

ML: I just think it's a cool shot. I just love it.

(They laugh.)

LM: Most of the stuff we did because it's a cool shot.

ML: We're not gonna bullshit.   (at 1:22)

The video moment is beautiful. The protagonist's hesitation to take on the quest, as evidenced by the slow motion filming of his crossing, is reduced to a hand idling on the last rim of the traversal. The pause and the inactivity of the protagonist are very important to their argument, but their verbal reflection about why they composed as they did is grossly insufficient.

When the students say "it's a cool shot," a sentiment repeated by both composers, they imply that the visual scene is sufficient for conveying meaning, and that speaking or writing are not needed here.   All that matters is the visual presentation of meaning. Communication has been achieved via the visual images in film; no spoken or written commentary is required.

By choosing not to employ spoken and written explication, the students do not take advantage of the opportunity to enhance their own critical awareness of their video essay as a product and of their strategies as composers and collaborators. Bartholomae accounts for this kind of dismissive rhetorical gesture by stating that basic writers' "relations to the world of verbal culture are often defined in such a way as to lead them to conclude that no relation is possible" (164). In keeping with Bartholomae's explanation, these students appear to dismiss the possibility that they can communicate meaning by formulating their ideas in spoken or written discourse. To motivate students to use language in addition to visual images, a teacher might point to the "productive sort of bullshit" as discussed by Eubanks and Schaeffer, which "ultimately produces better thought and better selves. We must acknowledge that benign bullshit is inevitable when people are attempting to write well" (387).

Such "benign bullshit" does function sporadically in these students' directors' commentary and "better thought" emerges intermittently.   For example, after the composers quip about their wonderful actor and how little they paid him, they turn to address one of the strategies they used to convey meaning, the jump cut. By their nature, jump cuts call attention to the discontinuous nature of filmmaking, and again, call attention to the film media itself (Bordwell and Thompson 335-6). In their commentary, the student composers acknowledge their deliberate intention to disorient the spectator, and they celebrate their use of the jump cut as the means to do so. At this moment in the film, the protagonist is seated in the library, trying to study, but he is having a hard time concentrating, stressed by the prospect of failing. The anxiety represented is relevant to Zipes' thesis that he will not effectively re-gain home (161). The two vantages of the protagonist beginning to study show the disruption of his purpose.

LM: The jump cut right here?

ML: How about that McKim? How about that?

The student's recognition of the work of the film class and the recognition of that professor ("McKim") as another potential audience is further proof of the remediated piece's hypermediacy (its highlighting of the media used). The composers have effectively twice interrupted the sequence by introducing an unforeseen audience ("McKim") for their production. This impulse is also proof that the interdisciplinary plan of the learning community is successful. It is an interesting (albeit awkward) moment that is evidence of the composers' transfer of knowledge learned in one discipline to another.

The composers have difficulty completely expressing the meaning and significance of their production. One of the composers is also an actor, the antagonist, and he has difficulty expressing his dual role in another important commentary. It is nearly impossible for him to provide adequate reflection on the film at this point, yet the beginnings of expressivity are evident. At this juncture, the protagonist is distracted from his purpose while his antagonist, a student reading the sports pages, flips the paper loudly and taps his feet to the beat of some internal music. The composers remark:

LM: This is where he starts to get mad.

ML: This is my favorite part of the ...

LM: Yeah, that's a really cool shot. I like it. You can see through me and ...

ML: Yeah.

The frustrated protagonist's face is viewed through a frame made by the antagonist's sneering profile, the table surface, and the extended arm holding the open newspaper. This framing resets the tension, so that it is clearly visible to the audience. The composers know this. They recognize its elegance and call attention to it with fractured formulaic responses ("This is my favorite part of the...") that degrade into the colloquial, monosyllabic "yeahs."

This elegant film moment precedes the conflict, which focuses on the protagonist's imagined or dreamed retaliation of the intruder. This is a particular ludic bullshit opportunity – a situation in which certain rules and expectations permit behavior that would not be appropriate in "real life" situations (Eubanks and Schaeffer 385-387). Given time, the instructor might press the composers to expand on what makes this moment favorite and why the frame ("You can see through me...") is so significant. Bolter and Grusin argue that windowing is an essential practice of remediation, and so too, it might work in the re-remediation of new media to text (31). To sum up their commentary, one composer resorts to generic titling, announcing:

> ML: I really like how we related what we did in class to the film like – seeing – like what we
>
> observed and how we applied it to what we know about film.

They are satisfied with their video production; they do not feel compelled to produce written discourse; they are satisfied that they have submitted a suitable project for their composition class.

What I learned from this exchange influences the way I will teach writing in the future. Both of these students could be characterized as basic writers. One is a film student, the other a dance and film student. I knew from viewing the music video that they *got it*, *that they could represent it*, and *that they could perform it*. I deduced from hearing their audio commentary that they could at least partially articulate the ideas that they had produced in their video. They tracked a fellow student's slow progress to the library–with its promise of Hansel and Gretel's cookie house–looking to resolve his ambitious hunger to pass a calculus exam. Their production demonstrated a deliberate choice of Jack Zipes' two propositions of the American fairy tale: (1) that it is a quest narrative that cannot be readily resolved, and (2) that the quest is complicated by personal choices (138). They also used the ideas and four-part schema (crossing, encounter, conquest, and celebration) outlined by psychoanalyst Sheldon Cashdan (31). They worked with film strategies; they accessed symbolism and metaphor. As composers, they adhered to one principle of academic production: that academic writing is writing about other texts.

However, for the most part, their representation is closer to a quest narrative, an agonistic venture (like one undertaken by the young Beowulf), than to an analytical essay. Their production was formulaic and repetitive, clearly derivative of their semester-long reading of fairy tales and adaptations of fairy tales. Even so, there is evidence of critical thinking related to the question posed and an awareness of a beginning, middle, and end in the composition. Technically, as far as a film production goes, it is well planned, well articulated and complete. It even has a dream sequence. This finding is problematic, an e-burden actually, because it is difficult for an instructor to respond to it as a written product.

Have these first-year writers sidestepped the assignment, preparing an insufficient product and thus non-assessable artifact for first-year composition? Are these students substituting their expertise in one area (video production) as an appropriate exchange in another area of expertise (writing academic prose)? What/who gives them the authority to do so? Does the fact that their presentation is non-textual devalue it as a measure of their responsiveness to the question? Were they composing meaning?

These student composers were clearly invited to make meaning in a multimodal way with an implicit textual reflection. Effectively, they may have side-stepped the anticipated response genre, but they do provide an equivalent (and in their minds superior) alternate. Their first sally into meaning making—the music video—demonstrates transparent immediacy, because the video production, as cinema, has achieved its goal "to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium ... and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation" (Bolter and Grusin 272-3). This feat is also accomplished by virtue of the video's subject and setting—the student questing, replete with a university-logoed sweatshirt, walks campus to an easily identifiable destination, the campus library. The setting is familiar, usual, representative of la vie quotidienne for any college student. The second recension of the assignment smacks of hypermediacy. In an outright rejection of textuality, the students next composed a directors' commentary as an overlay to their video. This rhetorical gesture is evidence of their awareness that the form of their first argument is non-textual. In this way, the commentary is representative

hypermedia as well. Bolter and Grusin explain, "In the logic of hypermediacy, the artist (or multimedia programmer or web designer) strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement" (41-2). The inclusion of a director's spoken commentary (in place of written text) underscores that the visual images and video presentation challenges the viewer to acknowledge the selected media for this academic project. In fact, the use of printed words is reduced to sporadic, isolated words from an accompanying song's lyrics.

Student new media projects are frequently agonistic in tone. By and large, my students have prepared productions that focused on conflict and struggle. Students were most comfortable or perhaps most interested in portraying struggle because the digital tales they created were situated in their own first-year experiences as college students struggling in an alien environment. Time after time, their productions staged difficulties with passing a test, falling in or out of love, doing laundry, being stalked, feeling abandoned, or missing home. The re-imagining of these conflicts manifested itself as conventional quest narratives akin to oral productions.

In a sense, the students' directors' commentary (as metatext) is evidence of their rejection of textuality and a deference to oral authority. Consider for a moment the history of textuality. For Middle English writers, the source of *auctorite* was the Bible and the associated *auctors* Church fathers (Minnis 10). Along the way, the ancient writers – both Greek and Roman – came to be associated with *auctorite* as well. But oftentimes, a medieval scribe would feel compelled to interpret a text and provide a metatext in image and gloss. Such metatexts colonize the manuscript's margins with the authoritative text set in the center of the page. Some medieval glosses are brief side-bars while others dominate the page and sometimes overwhelm the centered text. The inclusion of the metatext is one way that medieval writers could mediate the difference between an oral performance and a literate performance. Writers glossed in order to enter into the conversation initiated by an auctor. They believed that a good text accessed these

attributes and that an important text was a composite multimedia event. These glossed texts represent a movement from oral to literate expression and the beginning of English textuality.

One might conclude that an obvious e-burden is the reality that these students are not led towards textuality but rather away from it. Conversely, one might deduce that multimodality has guaranteed a type of expressiveness for these students otherwise denied them by the privileging of print in the academy. Here is an example of how remediation as reform works: "The assumption of reform is so strong that a new medium is now expected to justify itself by improving on a predecessor..." (Bolter and Grusin 59). The best way these students can manifest such reform is to produce an alternate, non-textual response that at first glance seems as if it is spiraling out of control. But from this whirl, the students are afforded the opportunity to produce something meaningful in spite of the fact that they lack proficiency in print literacy. The final e-burden lies in negotiating and wrangling the terms of the assignment and its assessment. What they make and how much time they spend making must be considered carefully.

If, as Collin Gifford Brooke recommends, guidance for producing new media must stem from practiced users of new media, then we are best advised to describe rather than prescribe successful multimodal assignments (25). This same impulse is expressed by Michael Wesch, who advocates the use of "new opportunities ... to create a community of learners with our students seeking important and meaningful questions. ...[as] we become students again, pursuing questions we might have never imagined, joyfully learning right along with the others" (para 28). This notion is consistent with Paolo Freire's recommendation that the teacher and student must be collaborators in the learning process (80). Thus, the instructor's role is to serve as careful observer and reporter of the multimodal compositions being produced. Indeed, this impulse motivates Brooke to propose a rhetoric of new media that is generative and descriptive (29-35). Like our students, we are standing in the middle of a spiraling pattern that is moving quickly, unfinished, and often interrupted.

In like manner, a metatextual (or perhaps hypertextual) strategy might mark the movement from oral to written expression for basic and first-year college writing students. My students glossed over the assignment prompt, entirely replacing textuality, the normative academic response format, with new media. These basic writing students reject or retreat from writing in favor of other media–both video and audio, which they find more appealing or useful for communicating. By inviting students to produce compositions which may not be written but do demonstrate their communicative strengths, instructors might proceed to tease the written text out of them through an extended (perhaps semester-long) dialogue about the initial non-textual composition.

At first, we teach with the hope that our students will learn how to write more lucidly and deftly approximate the academic frame, conversation, outcome, or learning goal we have adopted. However, it seems to me that we might dispense with some of this ambiguity – with the faded boundary of what good writing is – by considering the ways our students actually compose other texts, non-written texts, but important, cogent texts, which they may or may not be able to evaluate, but which they recognize as important and as good.

There is a new chapter to be added to the history of textuality: its writing entails commentary on our notions of the academic essay. Many of our students have mastered critical thinking capabilities that we do not understand. Consequently, I recommend that we revise some of our instructional methods and invite alternate kinds of new media into our writing curricula. Like Spirograph gears, new media can permit ellipses whose centers are constantly changed or displaced. With eyes and ears retrained, we may work alongside our students to learn to generate new kinds of communicative products by using new media in the writing classroom.

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