A Late Adopter's Chance to take an ESL Program Multimodal

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A Late Adopter’s Chance to take an ESL Program Multimodal

Erin Laverick, University of Findlay

As a doctoral student, I was required to take a course entitled Computer Mediated Writing Theory. In this class, we explored the research and theory behind computers and composition and how technology (re)defines the role of writing teachers in a higher educational setting. Unfamiliar with the technology and the pedagogy behind multimodal compositions, I felt alone, frustrated, and overwhelmed. I was focused on learning how to use the technology that I failed to learn the main objective of the course—the pedagogy behind multimodal compositions.

A few years later, I was assigned to teach several sections of first-year writing with large populations of English language learners (ELLs) at The University of Findlay (UF)—a private, comprehensive university in Northwest Ohio. The director of UF’s writing program announced instructors were “encouraged” to include one multimodal assignment into their courses. The projects would be included in the students’ portfolios, which are assessed by the English department faculty at the end of each semester. In her article, “Taking a Traditional Composition Program ‘Multimodal,’” Christine Tulley, director of the UF writing program, describes an assignment to introduce a multimodal curriculum. As Director of Writing, I ideally envisioned a writing program where first-year composition courses could have the same standard requirements but allowed for creative freedom. Presenting the poster assignment offered students multiple ways for creating and conveying meaning (1). Through my studies in the Computer Mediated Writing Theory course and in conversations with Tulley, I knew it was important to offer students multiple ways to communicate with an audience. I also knew it was time for me to apply what I learned in graduate school and design multimodal projects for my students to complete in the first-year writing course. Little did I know, this move would serve me well when I began directing the Intensive English Language program (IELP) on UF’s campus. Therefore, in this article, I share some statistical data and personal observations from implementing a multimodal composition in a first-year writing course made up of primarily ELLs and how I used this experience to implement multimodal compositions into UF’s IELP curriculum.

Going Multimodal

One multimodal composition assignment that worked particularly well in the first-year writing courses called for students to complete a written argumentative research paper in posters (appendix 1 and 2), which they presented to UF faculty, staff, and friends. This class was composed of only eleven students—one domestic student and ten international students. Ten out of eleven students completed a survey (appendix 3) at the end of the semester. The purpose of the survey was to determine whether or not they found value in the assignment. Based on their comments and the statistical data, it is clear that presenting their posters aided students in revising their written texts (Laverick).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presenting the poster aided in revisions</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these statistics, several students explained how presenting their posters helped them revise their written work. For example, a student wrote in regard to the revision process, “People at [the presentation] asked several questions that I didn’t think about. For my revision, I will study more about my topic and do more research to answer their [audience members] questions.” Another student wrote, “[the poster] made my focus clearer for my argumentative essay. Improving structure and focusing, organize, and develop their written arguments. The poster presentations afforded them a new revision strategy, as they gained valuable feedback and revision suggestions from presenting their work to a diverse audience.

Benefits for ELLs

Overall, the assignment offered ELLs additional tools for communicating with an audience, rather than depending solely on the written word. A student from Saudi Arabia commented he enjoyed presenting his work and “explaining for an audience and talking to them because it makes me explain my idea clearly.” Likewise Dong Shin and Tony Cimasko argue, “…Multimodal approaches to composition provide writers who are having difficulty in using language, including those writers for whom English is a second language (ESL), with powerful tools for sharing knowledge and self-expression” (377). Takayoshi and Selfe argue digital texts cross “geo-political, linguistic, and cultural borders” (2). As the semester advanced, I was beginning to understand how multimodal compositions help ELLs better communicate and revise their written work, allowing them to cross-linguistic borders and best communicate with diverse audiences through multiple channels. And I was beginning to think that by creating a multimodal writing program, UF’s IELP would benefit from implementing multimodal assignments into its curriculum.

While there is limited research about using multimodal compositions with ELLs, let alone using them in an entire curriculum, I thought it might be worth a try. What follows is an account of how I designed a new multimodal curriculum for ESL composition classes and why I introduced it into my classes. The multimodal compositions for ELLs, I hope for colleagues to borrow, tweak, and modify the process presented in this article. I began by reading sources that present pedagogically sound rationale for using specific multimodal assignments with ELLs. For example, Stein calls for using images such as photographs to help ELLs make meaning and improve their language skills (335). Skinner and Haggard focus on using digital narratives as a means for ELLs to develop their social identities and engage in new literacy practices (12). Benson also argues digital storytelling “…is also an engaging project for the ESL class utilizing numerous academic language skills, such as the expression of voice through story creation, process writing, research, and citing sources with the use of technology” (8). In addition, Nelson finds that students take on greater ownership when designing multimodal compositions because “knowledge of what a written text means is not limited to the written text itself but is visual and, and of the ability to design complimentary relations of meaning among these modes, represents a potent communication combination indeed” (63). Thus multimodal compositions offer ELLs multiple channels to communicate, which is even more helpful when preparing an ELL for her/his academic studies. For example, if a student struggles with writing, she/he may find it beneficial to include pictures or audio clips to effectively communicate her/his points. Based on the existing research and my experience teaching first-year writing, I knew it was time for the IELP to go multimodal.

Support for Faculty

With curricular revisions, came the need to train faculty so they could use the technology and recognize the pedagogy behind multimodal assignments. With limited time, I decided to implement several informal in-services into our faculty meetings. Also, to ensure faculty had the necessary resources, I purchased materials for department use at the end of several fiscal years. For example, we now have a department laptop, projector, 15 flip cameras, and 30 clickers. Faculty need not seek out resources; they are all at their fingertips. If they require technology training, the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) on campus can assist as well. Angela Crow writes, “If we’re setting up environments that are smart for learning, we shouldn’t place people [faculty] in the position of having to request special materials; we should ask them to select from options, resources that will facilitate their experiences without making these into abilities or disabilities” (116). Purchasing these materials, along with the CTE training, has ensured IELP faculty can focus on teaching the rhetorical and linguistic skills behind the multimodal compositions, rather than worrying about where to find the technology and how to use it. For my first faculty meeting in August 2009, I asked the instructors read Cynthia Selfe’s article “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing.” In this article, Selfe provides readers with a clear and concise argument for the use of multimodal assignments in composition courses in which she focuses on auralities. She writes: My goal in this article, then, is not to suggest that teachers focus on either writing or aurality, but rather they respect and encourage students to deploy multiple modalities in skillful ways—written, aural, visual—and that they model a respect for and understanding of the various roles each modality can play in human expression, the formation of individual and group identity, and meaning making. (625-26)

Selfe’s suggested we spoke to ELL instructors and proved them with an excellent foundation for recognizing the importance of including multimodal assignments in their teaching. Given that our target population is ELLs, we need to ensure students are thoroughly prepared for their undergraduate and graduate coursework, so offering additional students tools to communicate with—such as Shin and Cimasko recognize—was becoming a necessary addition to the program. My objective at the first faculty meeting was simply thinking about the tool modalities inking about how teaching, not just in the writing classroom but other skill areas (grammar, listening, reading, and communication) and Selfe’s article helped me accomplish this goal. I also invited the faculty to attend the first-year writing poster presentations. Most ESL composition teachers favor modeling as an instructional strategy in which students analyze sample essays to help them better organize and develop their own writing (Freeman and Freeman 38). Therefore, I decided modeling good teaching practices would be an effective means to introduce the faculty to multimodal compositions. I hoped if I eased them in, the instructors would feel comfortable trying such assignments in their own teaching. And fortunately, at the end of the fall semester, instructors planned assignments in their classes. They shared their ideas, asked for advice, and reflected on their experiences with me. Instructors

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We focus here on the need for revision in composition teaching, specifically in the context of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at the University of Florida (UF). Our goal is to provide a framework for revising the curriculum of a beginning-level composition course, where our program was a part of the larger English Language Fellows Program (ELP) at UF.

When we first embarked on this venture, the ELP course objectives were poorly written and not assessable. Below are several objectives for a beginning-level composition course:

1. Review basic paragraph construction
2. Review parts of speech as needed for effective revision of compositions
3. Use all tenses in the construction of all types of sentences
4. Use all tenses in the construction of all types of sentences
5. Review basic paragraph construction
6. Topic sentence
7. Review parts of speech as needed for effective revision of compositions
8. Write narrative essays
9. Write persuasive essays
10. Write descriptive essays
11. Write expository essays
12. Write research papers
13. Write essays with supporting evidence
14. Write essays with visual aids
15. Write essays with multimedia elements
16. Write essays with audio elements
17. Write essays with interactive elements
18. Write essays with collaborative elements
19. Write essays with peer review elements
20. Write essays with classroom discussion elements

Clearly, there were several problems with these objectives. First, they were not assessable and instead served as directions for instructors. Secondly, they were not specific enough to guide students in their learning. Finally, there was no consistency in what was being taught. When the program was at its largest (250 students), we offered several sections of each level. Instructors covered different assignments from different textbooks, leaving holes in what students thought they had learned. This approach created a seamless transition for course-to-course instruction and reinforced the language skills taught from the first year of study. For example, in the beginning level grammar takes place in the classroom and create a comprehensive curriculum with a multimodal component. It is also my responsibility to prepare them for their independent and graduate studies at UF. In addition, several of the best practices include multimodal assignments. In fact, if the program is to be successful, it must be able to understand how the skills should be assessed. As an administrator, I fell in the middle of these camps. I wanted key assignments and activities to be assessable and I also wanted instructors to have the freedom to teach the assignments in a manner that best suited them and their students. Therefore, I decided to create a new curriculum framework that would allow instructors to implement multimodal compositions to help students improve their academic English skills.

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Where Writing Happens: Elevating Student Writing Through Digital Storytelling

Jane M. Saunders, Texas State University-San Marcos

“Do you call people who write digital stories ‘authors’?” – Claire

And so begins a conversation about creating digital stories in Clara Vera’s high school class. Her students are participating in a process that Clara deems invaluable for her students’ literacy development: writing, critiquing, and employing technology as a tool of expression. What began as an interesting proposition, “Why don’t we try to make movies with students so that they can tell their stories, name their experiences?” evolved into an inquiry of students grappling with how to portray themselves in multiple mediated environments and through the written and reflected word. Calkins (1994) describes the benefit of writing in that it “allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it” (4), to essentially examine lived experiences and share these with others. What surfaces from this project are the tensions that exist in making such work public, and the challenges students experience in developing stories of self after spending a decade learning to write to stilted prompts for standardized tests.

This paper documents the progress of my work with a teacher and her secondary journalism students producing digital stories in the spring of 2011, in partnership with the National Writing Project. The work was both challenging and exciting – challenging because of the multiple drafts and media involved in the process; exciting because for the first time all year, Clara witnessed students fully engaged in writing as a process (Atwell 1998; Tompkins 2011) rather than a chore. What follows are the steps that Clara and I followed while working with students, excerpts from students' 'writing,' and their reflections on the process. Also included is what we learned about students by writing side-by-side with them, first on paper and then mediated through digital spaces. We discovered that where writing happens is not just the English classroom, as many secondary teachers might assume. And, if we want to increase students’ efficacy in writing, it could be useful to look for alternate spaces for writing to occur so that students can better examine their lived experiences, find their voices, and strengthen their writing.

The Roots of Digital Storytelling

An increasing body of research is surfacing about the power of digital storytelling as a pedagogical and learning tool for developing student writers (Dreon, Kerper, and Landis 2011; Hull and Katz 2006; Kajder 2004; Ohler, December 2005/January 2006; Robin 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman 2010). Defining digital storytelling is a complex endeavor; typically digital stories include two distinct processes. First, authors write (or type up) a story they want to convey and that they suspect could be matched well with images, music, video, or audio. Authors go through a writing and revising process to hone the story into a short and tightly knit piece and record themselves reading it. Using movie making software like FinalCut Pro, Moviemaker, or imovie, authors drop in the recording and then enhance this by adding images, music, etc. to deepen the viewers’ experience and understanding of the story. With increasingly available movie-making programs arriving in students’ schools and homes, digital storytelling projects are effective on two levels: expanding students’ understandings and use of the writing process (describe in greater detail later in this piece); and, helping students explore their lives in a medium that is conversely both familiar and strange.

Researchers (Dreon, et al. 2011; Kajder 2004; Ohler, December 2005/January 2006; Robin 2008) have written extensively about the process of making movies with students, largely drawn from the work of Joe Lambert (2009) and the Center for Digital Storytelling (2011). Bull and Kajder (2004) and Robin (2008) delineate the Seven Elements [more recently called the “Seven Steps,” by Lambert (2009, xiii)] that include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Point (of view)</strong></td>
<td>The story the author is attempting to relate through the moviemaking process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>The Voice of the Narrator</strong></td>
<td>The voice given to the student through an audio recording.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Timing, Soundtrack, and Music</strong></td>
<td>These elements include a music track and a soundtrack that may be composed digitally or selected from existing music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>The Plot</strong></td>
<td>The arrangement and structure of the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>The Script</strong></td>
<td>The written narrative that serves as the foundation for the digital story.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These steps are invaluable in providing a roadmap for the writing process in a digital environment, and offering guidance for students while developing, audio-taping, and piecing together their digital stories.

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