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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 so 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, writes about her experiences introducing multimodal assignments into the first-year writing curriculum, "As Director of Writing, I ideally envisioned a writing program where first-year composition courses could have the same standard writing requirements but instructor choice how to implement them, and instructor choice included use of at least one multimodal assignment." UF's new writing curriculum offered students a means to break away from traditional print-based texts and instead compose for a variety of audiences and purposes through a variety of channels, which according to Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe offer 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 transpose written argumentative research papers into 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).

| Presenting the poster aided in revisions | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 8 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

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 development within the paper itself might still be needed." A third student wrote, "I plan to take off one part [of the paper]. All the people [audience] think it's unnecessary." Overall, the act of presenting the posters helped students begin thinking about possible revision strategies and attack revisions in a sound direction.

Indeed, the poster assignment employed multiple literacies, as students were required to visually, orally and in writing present their arguments – a strategy Dunn advocates for in her book as a means for students to improve their writing skills (3). Also, Denecker reports successful findings using multimodal compositions as digital heuristics for students to revise their written work. Specifically, the poster presentation targeted students' diverse learning preferences and in turn helped them better focus, organize, and develop their written arguments. The poster presentations afforded students 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 talk[ing] 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 like the first-year 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 curriculum to include multimodal compositions. Since there are no models for instructors or administrators to follow when designing a curriculum to include multimodal compositions for ELLs, my hope is 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 Hagood 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, researching, and citing sources with the use of technology" (8). In addition, Nelson finds that students take on greater ownership when designing digital texts. "Knowledge of semiotic affordances and implications of what a written text encodes linguistically and visually, 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 his/her academic studies. For example, if a student struggles with writing, s/he may find it beneficial to include pictures or audio clips to effectively communicate his/her 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 these 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 our 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 that 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 eloquent prose spoke to the IELP instructors and provided 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, and so offering students additional tools to communicate with –as Shin and Cimasko recognize –was becoming a necessary addition to the program. My objective at the first faculty meeting was for instructors to begin thinking about how they could use multimodalities in their own teaching, not just in the writing classroom but other skill areas (grammar, listening, reading, and communication) too 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, some instructors began to pilot multimodal assignments in their classes. They shared their ideas, asked for advice, and reflected on their experiences with me. Instructors

were more confident and seemed excited about the outcomes of the multimodal assignments.

With the curriculum revisions still in progress, spring 2010 offered instructors further time to experiment with multimodal compositions and meet with me to discuss the successes and downfalls of the assignments. My goal was to implement the instructors' assignments and activities into a new uniform curriculum. For example, one instructor asked students tell fairy tales from their native countries using Movie Maker. Another instructor had students create podcasts, using Audacity to help them practice and improve their pronunciation skills. And finally, a third instructor had students read professional journal articles and transpose written summaries into poster presentations. Students presented the articles, using the posters as visual aids. By the end of the academic year, four out of the six full-time instructors were implementing multimodal assignments into their courses, not only into their writing classes, but also into other language courses such as pronunciation, reading, and communication skills. In addition, the faculty began visiting the CTE more often to learn how to implement new technologies into their classrooms. Slowly, our program's curriculum began to evolve.

**Revising the Curriculum**

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

1). Review construction of simple, compound, and complex sentences
2). Distinguish between fragments and complete sentences by identifying basic sentence parts
3). Review parts of speech as needed for effective revision of compositions
4). Use all tenses in the construction of all types of sentences
5). Review basic paragraph construction
  a. Topic sentence
  b. Supporting sentences
  c. concluding sentences
6). Introduce an awareness of topic, audience, and purpose

Clearly, there were several problems with these objectives. First, they were not assessable and instead served as directions for instructors to follow in their teaching. Second, because the objectives were so vague, new faculty members and adjuncts would simply teach from a textbook, often of their choice, and as a result did not implement any multimodal compositions to help advance students' proficiency of the language.

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 was taught within the levels. For example, a student once told me she wrote a narrative essay in three different levels of composition. Thus rather than building on what the students' learned in previous levels, materials and assignments were recycled and others were not assigned. Because we didn't have an assessment plan, students were not held accountable and simply advanced to the next level without a clearly defined set of outcomes.

In regard to the curriculum revisions, the faculty fell into two camps. One who wanted complete academic freedom to teach whatever they wanted and another who wanted guidance with clear directions of what language skills should be taught and how the skills should be assessed. As an administrator, I fell in the middle of these camps. I wanted key assignments and activities that assessed specific language skills, including multimodal assignments, reserved for each level of instruction. However, I also wanted instructors to have the freedom to teach the assignments in a manner that best suited them and their students. Therefore, I tailored the IELP's curriculum after the way Tulley revised UF's first-year writing program's curriculum. Through this approach, faculty maintained academic freedom but they also had greater expectations placed on them. According to Hafernik et al., "Although abiding by the course description and specific guidelines, individual faculty make almost daily curricular decisions regarding such factors as the pace of the course, the amount and type of homework, and number and type of in-class activities, the kinds and frequency of fieldtrips, the type of grading procedures, and so on" (105-06). To maintain the instructors' academic freedom, I designed a curriculum that offered new faculty members, especially adjunct instructors, guidance in their teaching but still allowed them the flexibility of designing daily lessons, assignment sheets, and rubrics.

Perhaps the biggest change was I selected a textbook series used department-wide that encompassed all four modes of language (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). The series offered continuity, not only between levels, but also between the courses within the levels. I used the textbook series to design "shell" lessons (appendix 4 and 5), a form adapted from a UF TESOL professor, which provides instructors with further guidance in putting together their daily lessons. For example, if beginning-level students are writing personal narratives, they also learn the simple past and past perfect tenses in the grammar class. And in communication class, they orally present their narratives. Thus all three classes focus on narratives composed in the past tense. This approach created a seamless transition for course-to-course instruction and reinforced the language skills taught in individual courses.

In addition, several of the lessons include multimodal assignments. For example, in the beginning level grammar class (appendix 4) the final assessment for simple past and past perfect calls for students to create a PowerPoint or video in which they narrate a story. The purpose of the assignment is twofold. First, it allows the instructor to assess students' abilities to use





the simple past and past perfect correctly through the act of writing and/or speaking. And second, it is a means for the instructor to introduce basic visual literacy skills, as the pictures and images students put in the slide shows must connect to or enhance the written and/or spoken text presented on the slides. This according to Selfe enhances a student's purpose for communicating (660).

In addition, in the advanced-level listening class (appendix 5), students watch a video about the US suffrage movement to practice their academic listening and note taking skills. After watching the video, the students discuss the content and compare it to women's traditional roles in their native countries. For a culminating project, students design a video in which they research and present a movement or traditional women's roles in their native countries. Students are required to conduct outside research on their topic and use APA documentation correctly within the video. While this assignment could be completed as a traditional research paper, the multimodal component allows students to better share their cultures and beliefs with their peers more effectively by including images and sound. Assignments such as this help students not only improve their language skills, they also hone their rhetorical skills and better engage with an audience –and as Benson argues both are necessary skills for ELLs to improve their academic English skills (8).

**Reflections**

The IELP is still in the process of implementing its new curriculum, and I continue to encourage instructors to meet with me and discuss their questions, suggestions, triumphs, and frustrations. Some still struggle to use the technology and recognize the pedagogical implications and value of multimodal assignments. As a late adopter, who struggled with such assignments in graduate school, I can empathize with them, as I was in the same position. I listen and offer them professional development opportunities or ideas for their lesson plans. In addition, I continue to design faculty in-services so the instructors can further recognize the rhetorical theory behind the multimodal assignments. As an administrator, I try to pay attention to what takes place in the classroom and create a comprehensive curriculum with a multimodal component. It is also my responsibility to ensure the faculty feels confident integrating classroom technology. It has been a long journey, but I believe our program is better off. Our students are now provided with multiple tools for communicating with diverse audiences, which will best prepare them for their undergraduate and graduate studies at UF.

*Author Note: Additional materials that support this project, including student handout, rubrics, and responses are available at: https://ufonline.findlay.edu/webapps/cmsmain/webui/_xy-1238577_1?action=ittach*

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**About the Author**

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# *Where Writing Happens: Elevating Student Writing Through Digital Storytelling*

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*“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 in 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) 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:

| Step | Description |
|---|---|
| 1. Point (of view) | The story the author is attempting to relate through the movie-making process. |
| 2. Dramatic Question | This creates tension and sustains the viewer’s attention. |
| 3. Emotional Content | This universalizes the experience and helps the viewer connect with the digital story. |
| 4. The Gift of Your Voice | Our voices convey who we are. |
| 5. The Power of the Soundtrack | Music and sound effects undergird and strengthen the story. |
| 6. Economy | The use of a short enough written text and related multimedia keep the audience interested without dragging on too long. |
| 7. Pacing | Both pauses and movement help pace the movie and make it easier to understand. |

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.