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Entering the Conversations, Practices and Opportunities of Multimodality Texts

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Cover Page Footnote

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Entering the Conversations, Practices and Opportunities of Multimodality Texts

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Introduction

How we teach writing is changing dramatically, or at least it should, because “multi-modal literacies has expanded the ways we acquire information and understand concepts” (NCTE, 2014), and students must have access to literacy practices that guide them to construct meaning through multiple literacies, particularly since the role of the linguistic is increasingly integrated with other symbol systems (Jewett, 2005; 2008). Therefore, how we prepare English teachers or writing instructors for complexities of multimodal composing is a perpetual challenge with implications for designing methods courses or other curricular opportunities for students (Albers, 2006; Doering, Beach & O’Brien, 2007).

Nearly twenty years ago, the New London Group (1996) described how students must develop multiple literacies and learn to design texts composed of different modes of communication. Therefore, how students design texts, under what conditions, and for whom and for what purposes, and how teachers provide access and opportunity to do so, are critical questions that challenge researchers, instructors and students. Scholars of multimodality composing are addressing these issues, as are their students, and as educators we must prepare teacher candidates and writing instructors to take an inquiry stance to examine “existing practices” (Whitney et al., 2008) and engage with developing knowledge and modalities. According to Jody Shipka (2011) teachers of multimodality texts are learning to be “especially proactive when designing and assigning tasks and in-class activities” (p. 139). Further, she states, “We...need to begin creating opportunities for students to attend to the highly distributed and fundamentally multimodal aspects of all communicative practice, to treat, in other words, communicative practice—whether the end result is a digital text, a print-based text, and object as argument, or a performance—as *multimodal accomplishment*” (Shipka, 2013, p. 76).

Yet, how can educators, teacher candidates and writing instructors enter professional conversations of multimodality composing, becoming proactive and grounding their understanding of it in the words and experiences of leaders in the

field? How can these conversations encourage teachers to try out similar instructional practices, providing students access to new ways of writing, designing, and examining texts? And, as Bowen and Whithaus (2013) argue, how can teachers and students recognize that these “new media and new genres are not some achieved utopia for perfect learning but rather are sites where conflict and agreement, success and failure, coexist” (p. 2)?

When teachers and students approach an unfamiliar topic, one of the challenges is entering the professional conversations of the field, which have historical roots. As instructors of writing (Theresa as a freshmen composition instructor and Doug as an English educator), we strive to lead students and teacher candidates into professional conversations of multimodality composing by demonstrating ways of observing, reading, and exploring descriptions and examples of it. We have sought to ground our assumptions and our approach to learning about multimodality composing in the discourse of three representative scholars (Tom Romano, Jody Shipka, and Cynthia Selfe) and their students. The key to the approach is exploring the discourse and interactions between and among scholars and ourselves in order to build knowledge; as teachers and students, we can analyze both discourse and interactions in order to develop a better understanding within our classrooms (Rex & Schiller, 2009).

To examine multimodality composing processes and practices of these scholars and their students we have adopted an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloome, 1997) in order to explore their discourse, how they conceptualize multimodality texts, and how their perspectives and suggested instructional practices have consequences for what their students have access to for learning, particularly as designers of texts. By an ethnographic perspective, we do not mean conducting an ethnography; rather, we approach the observation, analysis, and representations of the phenomenon by adapting methods and principles of ethnography to ground findings in the words and actions of those we observe (i.e., striving to approach an insider’s, or emic, perspective). We then raised questions about how the potential of the multimodality practices could influence and inform how students contribute and participate in local and global communities. This research process is one that educators might consider as they strive to prepare students or teachers for an increasingly multimodal world, particularly since many of us are continuing to learn with our students or teacher candidates.

Moving into the Conversations

Part of entering professional conversations is surveying the field and recognizing the theories, discourses and assumptions. Therefore, we provide a brief overview of multimodality composing that led us to the three scholars. For at least the past

thirty years scholars and teachers of writing have explored different methods that can be used to construct what Winston Weathers (1980) calls “alternative styles of writing”; in other words, ways of writing that differ from traditional approaches of composing linear, alphabetic texts. Alternative texts might consist, for example, of a combination of written genres and photographs or drawings. However, with expanding digital technologies, what constitutes “alternative,” or new norms in writing, is dynamic and includes—and often demands—previously unavailable ways of composing with written texts (e.g., three-dimensional objects interacting with visual, audio and written forms).

The most ubiquitous terms that refer to contemporary views of “alternative” texts include *multigenre*, *multimodal*, and *multimodal digital compositions*, areas addressed by the three scholars who are at the center of this study, Tom Romano, Jody Shipka and Cynthia Selfe. We will use *multimodality texts* as an umbrella phrase for one main reason: alternative styles of writing have been construed as alternatives to composing traditional linear, alphabetic texts; however, composing multimodality texts encompasses more than an alternative to a particular way of composing or presenting written texts. Multimodality suggests at least two or more modes of communication that contribute to meanings of a whole text. Hull and Nelson (2005) argue: “a multimodal text can create a different system of signification, one that transcends the collective contribution of its constituent parts. More simply put, multimodality can afford, not just a new way to make meaning, but a different kind of meaning” (p. 225). Furthermore, multimodality suggests different ways of composing, interpreting, talking about, and interacting with texts. Scholars debate connections among multigenre, multimodal, and multimodal digital compositions (e.g., Lauer, 2009; Lutkewitte, 2014), and there are implications for conceptualizing emerging genres within particular contexts (e.g., Bowen & Whithaus, 2013), for their theoretical positions, and for instructional practices in classrooms and other educational settings.

There are at least three challenges to entering professional conversations and practices of the field of multimodality in composition/writing studies: (1) recognizing how terms are defined and constructed in classrooms, under what conditions, by whom and for whom, and for what purposes; (2) observing how scholars, teachers, and students engage in practices reflected or suggested by the terms; and, (3) understanding what *counts* as multimodality texts within particular contexts. By *what counts*, we are referring to how scholars, teachers or students take up particular terms and practices in local communities and through discursive action shape what is possible, which in turn shapes participants and their actions. In other words, we are interested in how people engage in multimodality composing practices, not only in how terms might be defined a priori but how

people engage in actions that influence what and how they design and interpret texts with different semiotic systems for particular purposes. *Practices*, from a New Literacy perspective (e.g., Heath & Street, 2008; Street, 1984; Clark & Ivanic, 1997), include embedded ideologies and values in the discourse and actions. Teachers initiate and engage students in practices that they believe will guide students toward achieving selected objectives. As mentioned, adapting an ethnographic perspective provided a framework for us to observe the discourse and practices of representative scholars and their students and ground our observations and findings in their words and actions.

Methodology

This study grew from conversations between us over the past three years. In an initial project that explored composing multimodality texts, Theresa interviewed Romano, Shipka, and Selfe, who were selected because they are acknowledged leaders in different aspects of the field and are cited often by other scholars. Theresa also interviewed students who were selected in conjunction with each scholar, and who had consistently participated in designing and composing multimodality texts. Of the eight students interviewed, six of them were undergraduates (Romano's and Shipka's students) and two of them were PhD students (Selfe's).

For the purpose of analyzing the discourse from the interviews, we draw on Interactional Ethnography, a methodological framework that has grown from traditions of sociolinguistics, anthropology, and sociology, particularly with an emphasis on language-in-use as observed in educational settings (Castanheira et al., 2001). Although this study is not an ethnography, as mentioned, Interactional Ethnography can be viewed as a *philosophy* or *logic of inquiry* that provides a theoretical approach to observing how people interact, particularly through discourse, to construct knowledge or ways of working within their communities (Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Baker, Green, and Skukauskaite, 2008; Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Green, Skukauskaite, and Baker, 2012). In this case, we were interested in learning what *counts* as multimodality composing to the scholars and their students.

For the interviews, questions were sent to participants via email prior to the specified interview dates, thus allowing the interviewees time to consider their responses. During the interviews, Theresa used Skype or telephone to talk with participants and recorded each interview using an iPad and the program AudioNote. The interviews were transcribed and the discourse analyzed in order to observe themes and patterns of how the scholars and students define key concepts and engage as writers and designers of texts. Since one of the keys to

viewing phenomena from an ethnographic perspective is checking with participants about the accuracy of observations and descriptions, and revising as necessary, we shared early drafts with the three scholars and asked them to corroborate or clarify perspectives of their work.

Analyzing the Discourse

Discourse analysis of the interviews included observing and categorizing responses to questions that led to working definitions and descriptions of practices grounded in participants' discourse. Part of grounding evidence in the talk of participants is examining how a word or phrase is used within particular contexts. Therefore, during the analytic process we charted examples of participants' discourse and how it reflected their approach to composing multimodality texts, and through this approach we constructed taxonomies (Spradley, 1980), or charts that helped us understand key aspects of the composing process.

For example, Figure 1: Discourse Analysis of Multimodality Composing Processes (see Appendix) demonstrates how we compiled examples of discourse, which led to working, grounded definitions of key terms or practices (e.g., "multimodal," "exploring different perspectives," etc.), which emerged from analysis of the discourse--not given a priori. In other words, we began with the discourse and inferred meaning by observing patterns and checking with the participants. In the far-right column we listed actual discourse of interviewees and observed links between and among the examples, and this analysis led to more general descriptors that are located in the middle column. Finally, the next layer of analysis, represented by the far-left column, displays the term or practice that emerged, in this case, the practice of "exploring different perspectives."

Texts: Multigenre, Multimodal, and Multimodal Digital Compositions

Before we describe how the scholars defined key constructs of their perspectives on multimodality composing, and how their representative students engage as writers and designers of texts, we need to clarify our use of *text*. When we use the construct *text*, we refer to written, oral, visual, dimensional, and aural signs that are constructed by and "interpretable by some community of users" (Hanks, 1989, p. 95). Shipka (2011), who cites George Kamberelis and Lenora de la Luna's definition, says a text can be viewed as a "coherent constellation of signs that constitute a structure of meaning for some audience" (p. 40). Therefore, our perspective of *text* lends itself to observing how it is defined, negotiated and enacted by members of particular communities. This broad definition of text fits well within the frameworks of the three scholars. We turn first to Tom Romano and his use of multigenre, which in some ways underlies the other two.

Romano and Multigenre

In *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers* (2000), Romano describes and illustrates approaches to composing a text from disparate parts. Although he points to Winston Weathers (1980) as a catalyst for his work, Romano attributes his initial interest in multigenre composing to the work of Michael Ondaatje and his book *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: “I had never read anything like that before, all multiple genres with no explanations from one genre to the next, no traditional linking devices or anything like that.... I was already having students experiment with Winston Weathers’ ‘alternate style’ and [Ondaatje’s] seemed like a natural extension of that” (Interview, 2013).

As the term implies, *multigenre* suggests many genres; however, Romano uses the term *crots*, autonomous fragments that when woven together by a writer potentially create a text that coheres around selected topics, patterns, or themes. (More recently, Romano has shifted from using “crots” to the terms genres and subgenres.) Although for Romano a multigenre paper is print based, *crots* can include drawings and photographs, expanding his notion of text. According to Romano, multigenre writing invites students to select various genres of printed texts, including, for example, prose, poetry, newspaper clippings, letters, or recipes, as well as visual texts, and to compile them in structured ways that differ from traditional, formulaic essay-writing. On Romano’s website (2006) he offers an example rubric for multigenre research papers and suggests the following guidelines: multigenre texts should contain at least six to ten various genres and include a preface, introduction, or a “Dear Reader” informational essay (250-350 words), a note page, and a bibliography—he reiterated this perspective in the interview. More importantly, Romano stresses “that the paper needs some kind of introduction, needs something right off the bat that gives the readers a little bit of mystery that they will want to know, and grounds them in what the paper is about” (Interview, 2013).

In the interview, Romano explained how students often complain of their past experiences in expository writing; therefore, by introducing students to new ways of constructing texts, Romano urges students to view the composing process differently. One of Romano’s main purposes of inviting students into a multigenre approach is to compel them to explore novel or unique possibilities of composing texts and to invigorate them as writers. Other scholars have built on Romano and have recognized the enthusiasm the process can engender in students. For example, Margaret Moulton (1999) describes a list of *crots* her students used when composing multigenre papers, including newspaper articles such as obituaries, want ads, reviews, feature responses to works of art, and a television

newscast (p. 529). Moulton suggests that unusual combinations of text-based crots can trigger ideas and lead students to juxtapose apparently disparate texts (e.g., an obituary with a want ad); and the process of integrating crots provides students with different angles of vision on the unfolding text. Sirpa Grierson (1999) encourages students “to walk around the subjects, attempting to view them from all angles, until they are no longer two-dimensional, but intimate acquaintances” (p. 52).

These approaches to writing invite students to explore multiple perspectives and to discover new ways to make meaning. Quoting Sue Amendt, Romano writes, “The best things I’ve discovered are the way the [multigenre] writing becomes so interesting on all levels. Word choice and sentence variety step up at least a notch or two...[and] students’ inventiveness is triggered. They recognize the interactions between form and meaning” (Romano, 2000, p. 5).

Romano’s Current Perspective and Student Examples

Romano emphasized how working in multiple genres helps students develop “flexibility of mind.” For instance, he points to J. Ruth Gendler’s *The Book of Qualities*, which attaches personified human qualities and experiences to words (e.g., *stillness*, *clarity*, *beauty*, *fear* etc.), as an example of how a writer might incorporate ways for readers or viewers to recognize words differently, depending on the metaphor or image, and how they are juxtaposed with particular words or images. For Romano, Gendler provides unique examples of exploring ways to create meanings, and he couples contemporary and traditional approaches to writing in order to expand students’ concepts of expression (e.g., “flash fiction and prose poetry”). Romano states that “flash fiction and prose poetry have so much crossover between them...[and, therefore,] we look and see what those various genres are doing in the actual writing, and then I want students to try their hand at it” (Interview, 2013).

In his recent book, *Fearless Writing: Multigenre to Motivate and Inspire* (2013), Romano states, “Multigenre research writing shows faith in students as meaning makers who participate in creating the big world mural of writing” (p. 5), which leads to unique and varied perspectives on topics. In the interview, he added, “We become a classroom culture that values different ways of knowing and communicating—real flexibility of mind.”

Through analysis of the interviews with Romano’s students, we observed examples of their enthusiasm for their topics and processes, their “flexibility of mind,” and willingness to explore multiple perspectives. We uncovered samples of how the students explored different perspectives and multiple genres, along with how they discovered and used “golden threads” or *repetends* (Romano uses

these two terms interchangeably) that hold their texts together. For example, Jack, a teacher candidate planning to teach secondary English, initially chose to explore death and what that meant to him. As he constructed a multigenre text his ideas shifted and changed to include his perspective on death from different ages in his life, along with some of his family members' perspectives and a random stranger's, a person who responded to Jack's Internet post on the subject. Jack chose to do this by using poetry, dialogue, stream of consciousness writing, photographs, and narrative. He said, "By trying out different genres I am trying to explore different facets of whatever subject I am trying to look at." Jack's golden thread reflected the various perspectives on death—in particular the conversation he had with the stranger on the Internet, an interaction he strategically positioned in various places in the text. Jack's work reflected a "flexibility of mind" that Romano says develops from writing multigenre texts. Jack states, "When I write in different genres it makes me go deeper and do things I haven't done before...it makes you step back and think about all the different ways you can do something." Therefore, part of demonstrating flexibility of mind is to examine multiple perspectives, or to approach the composing of a text with an open mind, particularly assumptions about the purpose, audience and form.

Another one of Romano's students, Michelle, who also plans to teach secondary English, chose a medical theme and metaphor, an epidemic of *senioritis* infecting a school, and the concept of prescriptions became her repetend. She used a doctor-to-student perspective, instead of the typical teacher-to-student, and selected a range of print genres (dialogues, dramatic narrative, and prescriptions) along with a diagram showing how senioritis spread throughout the school. She too expressed flexibility of mind through the process in creating the project, stating: "It's your opportunity to let someone else see...best they can what is going on in your head. I think, more so than writing a [traditional] paper, [composing a multigenre text is] like, 'okay, take me into your world and show me with pictures or different styles of writing, what you were thinking.'"

Romano's students combined their prior knowledge of writing with new concepts and modes of communication they had learned in his class, creating texts beyond typical ones previously used when composing linear, alphabetic texts. They explored a variety of potential texts, themes, and perspectives and expanded possibilities for how to represent ideas and golden threads or repetends. Moreover, the key here is that Romano's students' processes of constructing multigenre papers led and encouraged them to explore perspectives that were embedded in the different genres chosen, instead of focusing through a single lens that one genre might suggest.

Shipka and Multimodal

Digital technology and three-dimensional artifacts add to, or build on to, possibilities of multigenre writing, particularly creating opportunities to compose *multimodal texts* from linguistic, visual and audio modes of communication in order to conceptualize, experience, analyze, generate and construct meaning. Jody Shipka (2005) states that a multimodal text may consist, for example, of newspaper articles, poetry, prose, photographs, websites, film, YouTube clips, “repurposed” items (i.e., one item transformed into another), maps, surveys, etc. Similarly, Peggy Albers (2006) describes how her students use “a number of modes—visual, language, and spatial” to communicate their vision through multimodal texts, and she suggests other possibilities that might be considered by some people as “art,” and not writing (e.g., foam boards, clay, books, pamphlets, songs, and PowerPoint presentations). However, for Shipka and Albers, what constitutes or counts as art or writing becomes blurred when conceptualizing multimodal texts, particularly for how twenty-first century students are learning to view and compose them.

Serafini (2011) argues that multimodal texts dominate what middle and high school students read outside of class. They engage in video games, websites, graphic novels, movies, magazines, etc., which expose them “to elaborate visual images, unusual narrative structures, complex design elements, and unique formats (Goldstone, 2004; Kress 2003).” Shipka concurs. Therefore, when we use the term *multimodal* we are building on Shipka and others in the sense that a multimodal text is fashioned by weaving together pieces consisting of different modes of communication, including the printed word. But how are multimodal texts accomplished, particularly by students who are unfamiliar with the process? What are challenges for teachers? And through discourse and action, how is multimodal composing defined and practiced?

Shipka (2005) describes one of her student’s first attempts at creating a multimodal text that begins to answer these questions. For the assignment, Shipka asked students to select a word from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and create a composition comprised of primarily of OED data (definitions and usages of a particular word). The student, Karen, chose the word “mirror” and focused as her concept on the challenge and frustration of taking standardized tests, particularly the time constraints of high-stakes testing. She designed a “mirror IQ test” that includes a written part composed of various font styles and sizes, all written backwards (to view the artifact, see Shipka, 2005, p. 295). In order to read the questions on the test, a participant would have to hold up one or more of the nine mirrors that Karen provided and negotiate the text with the other hand. However, only concave and convex mirrors, and a large mirror covered in black

tape, were offered, purposely creating hindrances for the participant who would find the text nearly impossible to successfully reflect and read.

Similar to the frustration of participants who would struggle to take the test “in a given amount of time,” Karen demonstrated her past aggravation with standardized tests; furthermore, she illustrated her confusion with the unfamiliar process of constructing a multimodal text, and her frustration with the time constraints of the assignment. Yet she completed it and constructed a complex project, underscoring some of Shipka’s objectives for the assignment: that a student expand her or his perspective of a selected word and topic through the composing process, recognize the value or consequence of choices, and demonstrate how potential meanings can be generated.

In the interview, Shipka discussed how she focuses on “getting students to understand how the choices they make, or are made for them [particularly, for example, socioeconomic ones], about the process, position them in certain ways and position their work in certain ways.” To guide students to recognize possibilities and constraints of their choices, she organizes workshops in which the whole class participates, including Shipka, for purposes of pitching ideas, contemplating and describing how proposed components (e.g., board games, video clips, t-shirts, etc.) may effectively represent their ideas, and listening to responses of peers about factors to consider in the design of the project. In other words, students learn to reflect on choices and potential interpretations as part of the creative and interactive process. From a New Literacy perspective, reflection can be viewed as a practice embedded in building or designing a multimodal project, and making visible or describing choices becomes important, particularly since what counts as a mode of communication to the person composing the text may challenge readers and viewers who are striving to make meaning with the text.

For Shipka, these interactions between composer and reader/viewer/listener are critical and represent a practice that contributes to creating multimodal texts, and she often engages students in novel, interactional approaches. In the interview, Shipka described how, for example, she initiated the idea of students communicating with her and each other through songs and gesture. Her purpose was to explore implications that might emerge as students in the class “traded on songs,” reacted and negotiated through music and gesture instead of relying on alphabetic literacy. The impetus to develop the activity arose from an observation and comment of one of Shipka’s students, who noted that while they constructed multimodal texts outside of class, inside the room they still engaged in traditional textual practices: reading and discussing alphabetic texts, and scribbling notes to be used later. In other words, they were practicing

principled actions of multimodality composing and thinking that Shipka describes as valuable only outside of class.

This epiphany contributed to Shipka recognizing and encouraging “the need to shift from writing to composing, to think more broadly about writing as an aspect of what goes into composing, as well as the need to shift from that ‘vertical mindset’ of improving certain types of student writing (e.g., academic prose)” (Interview). That is, typically, students are expected to write multiple drafts, which presumably will step-by-step, or draft-by-draft, demonstrate improvement of the presentation of ideas for particular purposes and audiences—mainly for the teacher. Shipka argues for a shift to horizontal thinking: “for the most part, [there needs to be a shift] to a horizontal [mindset] that would privilege flexibility, remediation, and change; so it’s the idea of ‘now that you’ve done this, how do you change it’? How do you make the same point in different ways? And what happens when you change the audience, [or] the form.” In other words, the thinking during the creative process is not linear; rather, composing includes flexibility of thought and vision, reflection, among other practices, towards communicating intended ideas, for particular purposes and audiences. Therefore, Shipka encourages students to make visible the often-invisible choices a composer makes when constructing multimodal texts and to recognize the possibilities and constraints of those choices.

Challenges and Student Examples

Shipka described how she has shifted from *writing* to *composing* in the classroom, empowering students to expand the ways they envision, approach and solve problems that a multimodal process offers. Composing can include multiple forms and might combine unusual pairings (e.g., a pair of ballet slippers with text written on them, or a video depicting a reinvented word without using alphabetic semiotics). The process of composing challenges students to observe or uncover potential texts that might link physical artifacts with print; and this pairing distinguishes her research and approach to multimodality texts from Romano’s.

One challenge Shipka describes, particularly in response to academic circles where the written word is privileged, is leading others to see value in multimodal texts and processes that guide the construction of them. She argues that she is positioned differently than those who teach multigenre or new media texts because her students often work with three-dimensional texts and live performances instead of traditional paper or electronic ones. Her students’ multimodal texts are viewed, by some critics, as more “artsy, expressivist or expressive, and merely creative.” However, she argues that digital texts in many respects mimic paper ones because, for example, they are flat and designed and

viewed using a screen—although in her recent work (described below) she has included more digital designs. Shipka says that three-dimensional and live performance choices should have the potential to be privileged as much as, or along with, written texts. Mainly, it should depend on the purpose and argument of the composer.

A second and related challenge is the inexperience of students in conceptualizing and constructing multimodal projects. Initially, students' backgrounds often reflect traditional knowledge and approaches to composing texts; however, part of encouraging students to see value in multimodal texts is showing them how to conceptualize and construct texts that are formed from apparently disparate or non-traditional texts, and then encouraging them to see how to recognize value in the process and product. For example, Karen in the example above “had not been expecting that the course would force [her] to build upon [her] past skills and former approaches to writing” (Shipka, 2005, p. 293), but Karen’s reflection demonstrates her growing awareness of the value of the process.

During the interviews, Shipka’s students demonstrated their capacity to articulate relationships or connections and transformations among choices that are intended to contribute to the representation and voice of their concept and project. For instance, Marie, a double major in English and Media and Communications, chose to represent the OED definition of *media* in the form of a tree, using a “family tree” as a metaphor and structure and transforming it into a three dimensional text approximately 18” high. In her “Statement of Goals and Choices,” a mandatory part of the assignment, Marie described how each part of the tree represented an aspect of the definition: “The texts that I placed on the roots are various institutions or things that affect how we see the media. They are things that shape our ideas and allow us to grow into our own personal perceptions of media. I’ve felt that the roots were a great place to put this information because just as the roots are the foundation of a tree, so do our ideologies act as the foundation of our world views, including how we see media” (Interview).

Marie further described how well crepe paper helped to contribute to the qualities of bark (e.g., that it can be peeled), and she hid messages beneath the bark that related to the context of her theme. In order to understand how the trunk contributed to the meaning of the media tree the reader or viewer would have to unwrap the bark and read hidden messages. Marie reflected on the value of her choices: “I think using what was available to me...transformed and enhanced my message.” She talked about the importance of the reader understanding the use of the tree as a vehicle and how to view the parts. For example, she included text on

two sides of the paper wrapped around the tree: “It could be misunderstood if [the readers] start on the wrong side [of the bark]...[so] I would put the green dot at the beginning so they would know where to start and a red dot at the end.” Marie stated when composing multimodal texts, “You’re thinking about these choices, and *this* is my message.”

Sally, another of Shipka’s students, who plans to write novels and work as an editor, chose a “film festival” as a theme for her multimodal project, which focused on giving voice to artifacts that reflected experiences of her classmates, who each contributed artifacts to the “class archive” (e.g., pictures and text written about a particular day). In order to incorporate everyone’s artifact she made two brochures and a flyer, along with a short movie, which combined pictures, gestures (e.g., using her hands to open a crumbled piece of paper), and printed text. She incorporated voice-overs and background sounds, and she purposefully selected certain artifacts and modes to represent them, cognizant of how the choices might impact her viewers and listeners. As mentioned, Shipka discussed how the choices students make, or are made for them, position their work in certain ways, and Sally reflected on how a recent, natural event and a mobile device—given to her as a gift—had shaped her project. The weekend Sally planned to film the movie, “Superstorm Sandy” hit the east coast and she elected to incorporate the experience into the film (e.g., “I found blowing wind sounds that I could put over the text”); and she described how a mobile device, a “tablet,” provided a means for her to film the movie.

Upon further reflection, Sally described her thought process that demonstrated an awareness of links between choices of constructing the film and the purpose of her project: “I think, what’s the purpose, so [I] always [have] that in mind with my movie. What’s the purpose of this transition? I had to think, ‘do I want the transition that comes from the center or do I want a transition that wipes from the side?’—there is a big difference [between] the two.”

Shipka’s Recent Work

Currently, Shipka is exploring “sound,” particularly observing and listening to sounds of daily life, ones that might ordinarily be ignored but impact us, what some people might call “white noise” (e.g., birds chirping, wind blowing through the grasses and trees, horns beeping, jack hammers, or workers yelling across a job site). She urges students to consider how incorporating sounds might position or impact their work. For example: How will particular sounds constrain or enhance a multimodal text? How might the additions enhance the concept or structure? But she acknowledges that “layering” texts demands time. For example, for a recent video that she constructed (Shipka & Hocks, 2013; to view it click on



the following link, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nv-ThAGhdAo#at=13>), she stated that on average every minute of footage represented 8-10 hours of work among designing, drafting and recording the written text (voice-over), photographing/filming the scenes, revising, and editing.

Shipka's reasons for contemplating sound as potential texts for multimodal projects, aside from the challenge of working with and concentrating on a new medium, grew from an awareness that she had typically ignored sounds as texts. She said that she is striving to better understand how sound blends and juxtaposes with visual and written texts, and she and her students are exploring how sound can be used effectively. An obvious question raised by Shipka's work focuses on the possibilities of incorporating digital technology. In her most recent research, demonstrated at the 2013 Computers and Writing conference, she described how she has included digital technology to capture and piece together visual and aural artifacts through digital equipment. Digital work adds another dimension to her position that students' choices are often made for them, particularly as to what they have access to and how those tools or practices position students, or how students position them (e.g., how Sally used the tablet to construct the film).

Digital technology provides at least one plausible answer to a dilemma Shipka continues to face as an instructor and researcher of multimodal texts, physical space. Teachers who work with multimodal texts require physical space, particularly to house examples of multimodal texts and to store students' projects while responding to and grading them. However, "English" professors, from the perspectives of others, do not typically require additional "space." (Shipka stated that it took seven years for her to secure a closet for storage of sample and student projects.)

Selfe and Multimodal with Digital Technologies

Cynthia Selfe (2004) says 'new media texts' refer "to texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media (e.g., film, video, audio, among others), and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues" (p. 43). More recently, Selfe refers to these types of texts as *multimodal digital compositions*, or through action, "composing multimodally" (e-mail correspondence). Selfe, among other scholars who focus on composing through digital technologies, presume writers are using, or will need to use, technologies that provide writers with more immediate access to multiple types of texts. Students certainly engage with digital technologies for their own purposes. As Selfe (2009) notes, "Anyone who has spent time on a college or university," or high school, "campus over the past few decades knows how fundamentally

important students consider their sonic environments—the songs, music, and podcasts they produce and listen to; the cell phone conversations in which they immerse themselves; the headphones and Nanos that accompany them wherever they go...and mixes they compose and exchange with each other and share with anyone else who will listen” (p. 617).

Increasingly, students have access to social media (e.g., Facebook, Tumblr, and Pinterest, YouTube, Twitter, etc.), representing other avenues of digital technology that reflect communication through diverse genres and modes of texts. These modes of digital participation provide students with opportunities to engage in meaning making that goes beyond creating written responses to assignments for a class or teacher. Doering, Beach, and O’Brien (2007) state: “Given this ready access to these broader, even world-wide audiences, adolescents,” and college students, “must then know how to go beyond simply creating multimodal texts to knowing how to design these texts using visual rhetoric [and audio, as Selfe argues] to effectively attract, engage, and influence their audiences” (p. 41). In order for students to produce what Doering et al. are proposing, they will have to understand their own processes and how those impact what they produce for their audiences, whether local or global.

Suzanne Miller (2010) states, “In the technological and cultural context of the past two decades, the movement toward non-print and print-mixed texts has accelerated due to the accessible digital affordances for creating and mixing print, images, sounds, video, and music. The underlying trend towards multimodality is not local and adolescent, but global and multigenerational” (p. 2). In other words, the ubiquity of digital media suggests that students need access to these technologies and to learn how to read and compose texts that constitute them. These assumptions lead to questions: How can teachers build on students’ knowledge of digital technologies? How can teachers show students that engaging in social media, even for their own non-academic purposes, includes composing, responding, reflecting, etc. and other practices valued by writing instructors and experienced writers? How can teachers build on relevant scholarship of the past by incorporating digital technologies?

Selfe and Developing Agency through Design

During the interview, Selfe expressed the importance of purpose, representation and position in reflecting content and context, a perspective that builds on her rhetorical background. She cites Aristotle’s influence and his value to composition instructors and their contemporary approaches of composing through “semiotic channels”:

As Aristotle said, use all available means to communicate and that’s what

made believers out of rhetoricians and composition teachers. We understood that there were multiple semiotic channels that we needed to communicate on, and we couldn't rule out any of those semiotic channels—especially if we wanted our communication to circulate widely, be effective across conventional linguistic borders, cultural borders, geopolitical borders, and borders of culture including race, class, and gender. (Interview 2013)

Multimodal composing through digital technologies provides contemporary means to communicate across borders, physical and virtual, and encourages composing practices that build on multigenre and multimodal approaches described by Romano and Shipka. Similar to the other two scholars, Selfe recognizes the importance of students purposefully composing and reflecting on processes and objectives.

Selfe focuses her instruction on inviting students to problem solve through composing processes, encouraging students to become “active learners” who “invest in their own success” and inquiries (Interview). A key aspect of this process is guiding students to develop a “composing plan” (see Selfe, 2007), which provides questions and ideas about how to compose with various forms or modes. For example, in her book for teachers, *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers* (2007), she provides a sample listing of possible practices that students could use when composing, for example, an audio text (p. 15). By providing this type of resource to students and guiding them to recognize how practices shape their projects, she believes students have a better chance of understanding and articulating their composing processes, and feeling confident with their final product. In other words, the resources contribute to students becoming active in their learning, or as Theresa learned through the Digital Media and Composition (DMAC) course, developing “agency in their design” (May 2013).

Increasingly, these resources become important as students learn to negotiate software programs and other technologies during composing. During the DMAC, Selfe and other instructors challenged participants to “play” with various software programs and mobile devices in order to explore ways to incorporate rhetorical composition through different modes of expression, ones that “exceed alphabetic text” (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 1). Selfe calls this type of playing *finger exercises*, meaning small, non-threatening assignments in which students have opportunities to learn new software programs while composing, which potentially lead to more complex and vibrant digital compositions.

For example, at DMAC participants were invited to construct a public service announcement (PSA) using information and techniques they learned from

finger exercises that included the following. Participants were given a group of audio files in which to pick what Selfe called an “intro and an end-voice bumper” (i.e., audio excerpts used at the front and back ends of the PSA); and then they were encouraged to add their own audio recording to the mix. The intent of the exercise was for participants to practice using an audio recording device, as well as editing software that would allow the composer to “string files” together and add transitions in order to create a “seamless” audio text. Participants then incorporated what they had learned from this lesson to construct a literacy narrative, which would include a reflective piece. After recording a two-four minute narrative, participants downloaded the file into the software program Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>); participants then recorded and downloaded a companion audio file, a reflection as to why the particular narrative was chosen. The two parts were spliced together and participants were encouraged to upload the text to the Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives (DALN), a “publicly available archive of personal literacy narratives in a variety of formats (texts, video, audio) that, collectively, provide historical record of literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change” (<http://daln.osu.edu/>).

Selfe (and Pam Takayoshi) further argues that teaching students to construct a concise, focused PSA “helps teach them specific strategies for focusing a written essay more tightly and effectively, choosing those details most likely to convey meaning in effective ways to a particular audience, for a particular purpose” (p. 643). In other words, as they learn to play with software programs that contribute to constructing multimodal compositions, students also have the potential to transform what they had learned in one context to another. In the interview and at the DMAC, Selfe further stressed the importance of audience: “I try to involve real audiences for [students’] texts; audiences outside of me, outside of the classroom, outside of the university, to make composing as authentic and real as possible within a rich environment.” A key to generating authenticity for students includes inviting choice of modes.

Selfe (2009) argues that teachers should encourage a choice of modes because, “When teachers of composition limit the bandwidth of composing modalities in our classrooms and assignments, when we privilege print as the only acceptable way to make or exchange meaning we not only ignore the history of rhetoric and its intellectual inheritance, but we also limit, unnecessarily, our scholarly understanding of semiotic systems (Kress, “English”) and the effectiveness of our instruction for many students” (p. 618). Selfe urges instructors to explore a variety of modes and the potential each adds to the other(s). Currently, for example, she is examining the value of aurality with

writing:

My ultimate goal in exploring aurality as a case in point is not to make an either /or argument—not to suggest that we pay attention to aurality instead of writing; rather, I suggest we need to pay attention to both writing and aurality, and other composing modalities, as well. I hope to encourage teachers to develop an increasingly thoughtful understanding of a whole range of modalities and semiotic resources in their assignments and then to provide students the opportunities of developing expertise with all available means of persuasion and expression, so that they can function as literate citizens in a world where communications cross geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic borders and are enriched rather than diminished by semiotic dimensionality. (p. 618)

For students, Selfe argues, the stakes “are no less significant—they involve fundamental issues of rhetorical sovereignty: the rights and responsibilities that students have to identify their own communicative needs and to represent their own identities, to select the right tools for the communicative contexts within which they operate, and to think critically and carefully about the meaning that they and others compose” (p. 618). For example, the social media sites mentioned earlier.

Student Examples of Multimodal Digital Compositions

Selfe’s composing principles and suggested practices are reflected in her students’ work. For example, in the interview, Elaine, a PhD student and writing instructor, described how as an undergraduate she built a digital portfolio. During the process she learned “to communicate in multiple modes, including [with] visual, audio and video text,” which represented her first academic experience in those genres. She began to recognize the value and democratic potential of multimodal texts, such as those included in the social network MySpace (which she also studied), and practices that led to their construction. Recently, as she began working closely with Selfe, Elaine focused on literacy practices in multimodal work and their value: “What is really important is the democratic potential in these texts, the fact that [multimodal] really opens up literacy practices—reading and writing” (i.e., for example, the practices of multimodal work have the potential to be more “inclusive”). However, she acknowledged that there are “access barriers, issues of accessibility, and [cultural] bias.”

As she turned toward opportunities for learning, Elaine suggested that multimodal practices are “inclusive for multiple ways of learning and composing that...would or could appeal to a broad base of students and get them involved in ways that they might see as more useful and relevant to their everyday lives”

(Interview), even if some of the lessons are frustrating. For example, she described how “finger exercises” could lead to learning and problem solving. When students are working on a “projects or pieces” within a software program, she says, “I encourage them to break it, to mess it up,” because “the idea is that if they mess it up...they have to trouble-shoot and reverse engineer” the steps in order to figure out how the program works. For example, if a student were to attempt to *cut* and paste a file into the software program Audacity, he or she might lose the file; therefore, the student would eventually learn that the better method would be to *copy* and paste. Elaine states, “These problem-solving and analytic skills are a big part of what...we can teach in composition generally,” and these can lead to how to apply the skills in specific contexts (Interview).

Another student, Abbie, also a PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition, stressed the importance of knowing her audience and how she communicates ideas to them, whether through multimodal or more traditional alphabetic texts. While working on a recent article she had to decide to whom to gear her paper, a more conservative or liberal audience. She mentioned this because what she decides, of course, influences her design choices, as well as answers to other key questions: “What will the navigation structure be? How will I encourage people to move through this piece? What accessibility elements am I going to add in? How does this position me and the perspective I am trying to convey?” (Interview).

Abbie draws on what Selfe referred to as “semiotic channels” when deciding how she is going to present her multimodal argument. For instance, if video is critical to the argument, how will she embed videos in the text, and what portion of the video will be included. As she anticipates the reader and viewer should she, for example, offer caption or autoplay? These representative questions have led her to consider how she positions her argument and focuses on the selected audience. This reflexive stance further demonstrates some of the principles visible in Selfe’s work, as mentioned above: “issues of access, equity, agency and literacy” (DMAC).

Findings and Conclusion

We have demonstrated a methodological approach to entering professional conversations and practices of composing multimodality texts, a process that teacher educators and writing instructors might use to enter conversations with their students and to make visible the developing knowledge of the field. By interviewing three leading scholars and representative students of each, we ground our findings in their illustrative, discursive actions about what counts as composing multimodality texts, and how their perspectives might inform instruction. We have uncovered principles and practices that underlie these

scholars' efforts as teacher educators and researchers, and we have learned how the scholars define key terms and ways to engage in multimodality work. However, before describing more about our findings, we offer two caveats.

First, one article cannot capture the complexity of the composing processes and practices described by Tom Romano, Jody Shipka, Cynthia Selfe and their representative students. For fuller accounts we highly recommend their published work. We were impressed with the depth and breadth of what they offered and their commitment to exploring multimodality composing and the potential it has to offer students who are learning and preparing for their next personal, academic and professional steps. We also recognize that each scholar comes from different research traditions with discourse and history that inform how each defines or describes particular terms and practices. However, we have chosen to present composing multigenre, multimodal, and multimodal digital compositions under the umbrella term multimodality. The reason for this is that we observed commonalities across all three in terms of the types of practices, modes and genres that they describe, and that it represents approaches to composing that differ from traditional, print-focused writing. Furthermore, their perspectives on composing share traits that appear to fit within a similar pedagogical tradition, one that privileges the experiences and background knowledge of students and their potential for exploring new ways of creating and interacting with texts.

A second caveat centers on Theresa's personal observation of these scholars as teachers and mentors, and as inquirers into a rich field of study. At the core, they are of course interested in guiding students to recognize possibilities in composing multimodality texts; but they are also personally intrigued by what students bring to the context because they view students as an integral part of the instructive and the critical interactive process. For example, Romano brings flash fiction to class so students can juxtapose it with prose and ruminate on their experiences while forging new or possible links between the texts. Most importantly, he says, by immersing students in multigenre projects, "We become a classroom culture that values different ways of knowing and communicating" (e-mail correspondence). Similarly, Shipka values whole-class workshops because students, for example, are invited to bring three different ideas for how to represent a chosen subject; by collaborating with each other, examining potential choices, the students learn how to value a process of engineering a project that grew from multiple voices and perspectives.

Furthermore, the scholars appear to stay current in the field not only because of their own academic commitments but also because of their passion for the work; and they recognize that students are on the cutting edge of engaging

with technologies, an observation that has potential consequences for instructors and students for learning about multimodality composing. For example, Selfe, as the originator of DMAC, encourages instructors to engage with digital technologies and composing of multimodal texts, and she offers free resources to participants and their students. Most importantly, she values the whole process: “I love DMAC because I can work with smart and committed teachers and students to imagine the possibilities of—and experiment with the challenges of—new multimodal genres as they emerge and are shaped in digital composing and communication environments. What could be more fun than that?” (e-mail correspondence).

Perspectives, Principles and Practices

We found that Romano, Shipka and Selfe share some common perspectives on multimodality composing, although Romano focuses more on multigenre texts and the other two on multimodal texts. For example, they all view *text* as an expanding construct, which include different modes of communication and blur lines between art and writing. They all view composing as complex processes and practices that should be purposeful, reflexive and dynamic. In fact, a key practice for all of them is reflection, urging students to examine the choices they made during composing, for what purposes and audiences, and to recognize potential consequences of those choices.

Although for all three writing and composing are at the center, their apparent differences demonstrate professional conversations in the field and highlight aspects of constructing texts through different genres or modes of communication. Romano, for example, focuses on print, yet encourages students to consider photographs, or other visual texts; Selfe and Shipka focus on digital technologies, although Shipka encourages students to include three-dimensional texts and even live performances. But their similarities toward pedagogy are most striking. They acknowledge rhetorical traditions that focus on a writer’s purpose, audience, form and style; yet, they are interested in how traditional boundaries might be bridged and how practices associated with multimodality composing have consequences for what students have access to as writers/composers for learning.

Key principles. For all three scholars, students should have *access* to composing practices that encourage constructing multimodality texts, particularly since they are consumers of them and must learn to consciously select genres or modes of communication to build their own in order to contribute and participate in local and global communities. For example, students must have opportunities to engage in selecting topics and choosing from near endless possibilities of



designing texts for their purposes and intended audiences. During and after composing processes, students must be able to reflect on how the text was constructed—or is in the process of being constructed. Part of having access to composing practices includes students having access to technologies. As mentioned, students increasingly are expected to engage with various technologies across social, academic and professional arenas; therefore, they must have opportunities to explore software programs that contribute to designing multimodal texts.

A second principle is that these composing practices, including access to technologies, should lead students to *develop agency in and through their design of multimodality texts*, as Selfe asserts. Developing agency has at least two relevant perspectives: consciously engaging in the construction of texts for students' own purposes; and students generating texts that provide agency to and for others, particularly for their intended audiences. For example, Marie, who created the media tree, described in her "Statement of Goals and Choices" how each piece of the tree represented a particular aspect of the term "media," whether it was a component or person or media concept. More importantly she made the connection between what happens when a reader/viewer interacts with the media tree and how that parallels what happens when a person obtains information. Marie said, "I wish I had added a warning at the bottom of the guide that says, 'once you've dissected the tree, you can never return it to its previous state.' This would have been an incredible way of saying that once you open your eyes to see how your views of mass communication are shaped, you can never return to ignorance."

Through composing multimodality texts, students also learn to develop a third key principle, what Romano and Shipka call *flexibility of mind*, the capacity to explore different perspectives and stay open to possibilities. Part of this process includes what Shipka encourages her students to do: they should engage with each other as composers and as readers/viewers/listeners, and through these interactions, they learn to examine perspectives and topics and hear responses from others. These principles lead to practices that underlie the composing of multimodal texts.

Practices. As mentioned, from a New Literacy perspective (e.g., Heath & Street, 2008; Street, 1984; Clark & Ivanic, 1997), practices include embedded ideologies and values in the discursive actions of participants. Therefore, teachers initiate and demonstrate practices that they believe will guide students toward achieving selected objectives. For all three scholars, constructing a purposeful text designed through multiple genres or modes are key. Part of the process is consciously selecting topics or issues to respond to through composing and

developing agency through design. By creating what Selfe calls a composing plan, they begin to learn how the choices they make constrain or enhance the process and what unfolds toward their intended goals for the project.

Another key practice we observed was students exploring different angles or perspectives on a topic. By taking a reflexive stance and considering choices for the designed purposes of the project, students learn to view composing as interactive and dynamic. Furthermore, the three scholars describe participatory interactions that are critical for the effectiveness of these interactive events, which can begin to create bonds between the author and potential readers. Although Julie Jung, author of *Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts* (2005), refers specifically to multigenre texts, her statement fits with larger multimodal conversations too:

Multigenre [and multimodal] texts promote better listening because they break down a reader/writer binary that positions the writer as a disembodied disseminator of “truth” and the reader as passive recipient. These texts instead create a participatory relationship between writer and reader, a relationship that holds both parties responsible for the construction of meaning. (p. 34)

There is no *one* list of practices or composing processes for all to follow. Selfe confirms the diversity in processes when she states, “There are as many multimedia/multimodal/multigenre composing processes as there are students, composing tasks, and instructional composing contexts” (e-mail correspondence, Sept. 24, 2012).

A final note on practices. As we analyzed the transcripts, it became obvious that when students described their experiences in writing more traditional texts or responding to traditional assignments, their description of composing these linear, alphabetic texts differed greatly from their experiences with multimodality ones. For example, when composing traditional texts, Lauren states, “I might write an outline or come up with a claim.” Another one of Shipka’s students, Rachel (also an English major), mentions the mindset of the five-paragraph essay and just-sit-down-and-get-it-done, stating, “I think about the three points I usually have in an essay and how I can make each component long enough to fulfill the requirement.” Similarly, Sally demonstrates the brevity of her view of the traditional process, saying, “You sit down at the computer and make paragraphs and you lay it out.”

Shipka noted that it is equally important for students to be able to articulate one’s choices when composing a linear or multimodal text. Therefore, when students in her class say, “You won’t let us write a [traditional] paper.” Her reply is, “Write a paper, but then you [will] need to break that down and explain



why this title, why this sentence, why this word choice, etc.” She says, “Students are not as skilled in talking about the writerly choices they make as they are about talking about color, font, shape, etc., [in a multimodal text].” The multimodality composing processes and practices of these scholars have the potential to change that, and the approach of entering the conversations of the field by grounding observations and findings in the discourse of leaders of the field provides a way in for teachers and ultimately for their students.

Endnote

Methodology. All of the students were in college (at the universities of the three professors), and were above 18 years of age, and Human Subjects approval was secured through the university’s IRB.

Interviews

Tom Romano, January 2013

Romano’s students*: Jack, Lauren, and Michelle (January)

Cynthia Selfe, January 2013

Selfe’s students*: Abbie (February) & Elaine (January)

Jody Shipka, January 2013

Shipka’s students*: Sally, Marie, and Rachel (January)

*All students’ names are pseudonyms

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Appendix
Discourse Analysis Of Multimodality Composing Processes
Figure 1.0

