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(De)Valuing Multimodality: Exploring One Teacher-Writer’s Uneven Development in a Multimodal Composition Course

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Introduction

Our students live in an increasingly connected world, one influenced by myriad modes of communication. As a result, there have been increased calls, from scholars and professional organizations alike, to rethink the breadth and scope of literacy practices, especially those viewed as academic and school worthy. Williams (2007), for example, writes, “we should...regard the ability to use multiple modalities...as a call to examine how new ways of conceiving of literacy and composing produce new possibilities...” (p. xi). Yancey (2004) called for an expanded view of composition beyond traditional, alphabetic text. Echoing the New London Group, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) suggest a pedagogy of multiliteracies, where all modalities and forms of communication are viewed as dynamic and vital to creating and exchanging information. A number of others (e.g., Serafini, 2014; Snyder & Bulfin, 2008) continue to argue for an expanded view of literacy that acknowledges the ways different modalities can be combined to create and share information.

Similar to these researchers and teachers, NCTE (2011), in their definition of 21st century literacies, claims that students should be able to “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate” (para. 1) a variety of multimedia and multimodal texts. These voices point to the need to rethink traditional notions of literacy instruction, especially at the K-12 level. Continuing to privilege alphabetic text in classrooms risks making writing and writing instruction irrelevant to the lives and interests of students (Selfe, 2004). In this context, it becomes increasingly important to prepare

ELA teachers to foster multimodal literacy skills in students. ELA teacher candidates (PSTs) need multiple opportunities to engage in multimodal reading and writing, to develop a writing teacher identity, and to consider related pedagogical implications for their future classrooms.

Becoming multimodal literacy educators is not a straightforward process, as recent research suggests. Hope (2020), for example, notes that PSTs may feel vulnerable when engaging multimodal literacy as they renegotiate what counts as school worthy literate practice. Alsup (2019) further argues that teachers navigate a "borderland discourse" between personal and professional identity, a process sometimes resulting in crises and even refusals to learn and change. The learning of multimodal literacy is such a borderland discourse, where PSTs remap the geography of academic literacy and reconfigure the writing identities of themselves and students.

The present study, grounded in the experiences of one ELA PST in a multimodal composition course for educators, adds nuance to that conversation. Our work is driven by the following questions.

- In what ways does a multimodal literacy course impact PSTs' views of and positions on multimodal literacy instruction?
- What impact does a course focused on multimodal literacy/composing have on the identity development of ELA/writing teachers?
- What prior experiences and understandings facilitate or prevent PSTs' uptake of multimodal concepts?

Teacher Identity

In our study, Elise believed teachers were nurturers, and this influenced how she imagined multimodal literacy and herself as a teacher. The literature on teacher identity helped us make sense of how her learning multimodal literacy occurred alongside her becoming a teacher. Teacher identity is dynamic and influenced by individual and contextual factors. The construction of teacher identity, as described by Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000), is an ongoing process of negotiation, of merging personal and professional values in shifting social, cultural, and political contexts. Teacher identity, constructed and reconstructed over time (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Rodgers & Scott, 2008), is shaped by individuals' values, beliefs, and sense of agency.

Relatively recent work on "teacher-writer" identities has helped the field understand the overlap and tensions between writerly and teacherly identities. Whitney's (2009, 2012, 2017) scholarship over the last decade, for example, documents the transformative relationship between teachers' writing practice and writing pedagogy. Teachers of writing who write are more likely to create classroom writing cultures characterized by vulnerability, empathy, and writerly authority. Even so, scholars call for more attention to teacher identity within teacher

education (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2007). In fact, teacher preparation standards (e.g., NCTE), for all they do, and by connection ELA teacher preparation programs, have often stopped short of highlighting the ways teachers and students develop identities as writers (Alsup, 2006; Premont, Kerkhoff, & Alsup, 2020). Thus, research that considers the role of writing teacher education in the development of writing (teacher) identities remains vital.

Within teacher preparation, PSTs can struggle to see themselves as teachers and professionals, influencing how they interact with course materials and teachers and students in the field (Franzak, 2002). They may rely on “apprenticeship of observation” experiences (Lortie, 1975), or how they were taught, to form coherent philosophies and identities in the midst of profound change. This may explain, for instance, Elise’s reliance on “learning styles theory” to make sense of multimodal literacy instruction or her use of familiar cultural scripts (teacher as nurturer) when trying to construct a teaching self.

To support identity development, teacher educators need to provide PSTs authentic opportunities to question, self-assess, and challenge their beliefs (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004); to participate in professional discourse and to be seen as contributing to such discourse (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008); to take risks as part of identity formation (Reio, 2005). The multimodal composition course featured in this study was designed with these recommendations in mind. Elise had numerous opportunities to read about, practice, and articulate and reflect on her beliefs about multimodal literacy. Teacher identity development is hardly a story of uniform growth but one that includes stalls and failure. Elise’s case represents teacher identity development as similarly fractured and uneven.

PSTs and Multimodality

Researchers and educators (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006; Luke, 2000; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007) argue that teacher preparation shift to help PSTs interrogate traditional literacy practices and embrace a broader understanding of literacy and the multimodal world. PSTs’ literacy beliefs and practices are largely influenced in two ways: by the K-12 literacy experiences of their past and by the instruction they receive in teacher preparation (Ajayi, 2009; Benevides & Pearson, 2010; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Richardson, 2003). PSTs need opportunities to conduct analyses of multimodal texts, to expand their understandings of literacy, and to engage in multimodal writing (Cook & Sams, 2018; Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006). For a decade, scholars (e.g., McVee, Bailey, & Shanahan, 2008) have argued that teacher educators provide PSTs with authentic opportunities to consume, compose, and design instruction with multimodal texts.

Although fewer studies investigate the relationship between PSTs and multimodal literacy instruction, those we have suggest further research to better

understand how to provide PSTs with multimodal experiences that positively impact their future teaching. The course featured in this case study was designed to help PSTs analyze, write, and reflect on multimodal composition and to develop coherent philosophies about multimodal instruction through multimodal writing. Elise's relationship to multimodal composition adds to the story of how students navigate new content. She uses prior schema and notions of literate practice to learn and misread new concepts. Her uneven learning story is instructive to others who integrate multimodal composition in their courses.

Course Context

This study was conducted in a writing methods course at a large research university in the Southeastern United States. The course, generally taken during the first semester in the English education program (i.e., fall of junior year), is a requirement for all secondary ELA students. Course content focused on multimodal consuming and composing. PSTs read and composed multimodal texts and used those experiences to consider their future literacy instruction. Composing assignments included video essays, podcasts, graphic narratives, website design, and blogs.

A major goal of the course was for PSTs to consider how using multiple modes of communication, including the overlap of multiple modalities, can provide rich opportunities to create and share information and to produce relevant and rhetorically powerful texts. To form a working definition of multimodality, the instructor and students pulled from Jewitt and Kress (2003) and Kress (2009). They understood a "mode" to represent a culturally-recognized channel of communication and "multimodality" to represent the various, overlapping, and connected modes of communication used to generate and express ideas.

PSTs were provided a range of scaffolding throughout the semester. They read a variety of academic articles and chapters to develop a vocabulary for talking about multimodal composition and build their knowledge of the research, theory, and pedagogy supporting the work they were being asked to do. Key texts included excerpts from *Understanding and Composing Multimodal Projects* (DeVoss, 2011); *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers* (Self, 2007); and "Imagining the Possibilities in Multimodal Curriculum Design" (Albers, 2006). Prior to composing any text, the instructor and PSTs analyzed mentor texts (e.g., professional blogs, podcasts, and video essays; websites; comics and graphic novels).

The instructor scaffolded PSTs' experiences through whole-class and small-group discussion, one-on-one conferences, feedback on drafts, and revision. The instructor also composed alongside PSTs and used modeling and think-aloud strategies to support student learning. Because student-centered approaches to composition instruction were vital to the course—and are vital to preparing ELA

teachers—PSTs also regularly discussed moving away from teacher-centric instruction and toward instruction designed around students. PSTs often offered experiences from their own secondary education and unpacked the ways those experiences served as either teacher- or student-centered teaching and learning. The class also engaged in weekly critique of the course itself, the assignments, and the assessment methods used (students were heavily involved in establishing and applying all assessment criteria throughout the course). PSTs used these critiques to think forward to their own classrooms and future students.

Participant Description

Elise identified as a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman. She was a first semester junior beginning the English education program. In addition to the writing methods course, she was enrolled in other education-focused courses, such as Foundations of Education and Language Instruction for Teachers. Elise spoke often in class about her deep desire to affirm and to love students. During the beginning of the semester, instead of sharing ways she hoped to impact students' literacy practices, Elise described herself influencing students outside the curriculum through care and kindness.

Elise entered the course with little to no experience with multimodality. She hesitantly admitted during the first week that she did not know what a “mode” was. The bulk of her K-12 (and post-secondary) educational experiences, she told us, had been focused on reading and writing in the traditional sense. She shared often about the power of the written word and believed that championing traditional reading and writing was her duty as an ELA teacher. Understanding Elise's context and the experiences she brought with her to the ELA program and to the writing methods course offers a useful lens for viewing the findings below.

Methodology

Yin's (2003) notion of case study supports our work and acknowledges that case study research examines a phenomenon within a particular context to better understand the relationship between the context and the phenomenon of interest. Ellinger, Watkins, and Marsick (2005) further note that case study research is bounded and can center a single individual in a larger context or system. In the field of literacy research, specifically, a single case study illuminates the situated and contextual nature of literacy practices and of learning to read and write (de los Rios, 2018). Strong case study research includes prolonged contact with the research subject and multiple data sources (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Both conditions are met in this single case study of Elise.

Data Sources & Analysis

The writing methods course centered PSTs' multimodal reading and writing and their reflections on future literacy instruction. We focus here on the experiences of one PST—Elise—and the ways she understood multimodality and imagined herself as a developing writing teacher. Examining Elise as a single case study provides an in-depth view into (1) the ways she composed and articulated her composing decisions and (2) her evolving understandings of and beliefs about multimodality as part of the ELA curriculum. Data sources consisted of Elise's multimodal composing (diagnostic essay, audio essay, graphic narrative, video essay, and blog entries) and reflections. Each of the assignments from the course was designed and used to scaffold student understanding of multimodal composing.

The diagnostic essay was completed the first week of the course and offered a glimpse into students' familiarity with reading and composing a variety of multimodal texts and their feelings/beliefs about integrating multimodal composition into secondary literacy instruction. In the audio essay, students were asked to explore their questions about and emerging positions on multimodality as a means of expression and for use in the literacy classroom. The graphic narrative asked students to use their experiences reading, viewing, and discussing multimodal texts (including a variety of comics and other graphic texts) to compose their own graphic narrative that represented their reactions to and/or analyses of one or more of the readings/viewings done as part of class. Accompanying the graphic narrative assignment was a brief reflection essay requiring students to explain the rhetorical and composing decisions they made and to share their opinions on the educational value of reading, studying, and composing multimodal (including graphic) texts in secondary classrooms. The video essay was designed to help students use their growing knowledge of multimodal composition to create a video that articulated their stances on teaching and assessing composition, including using multiple modes of communication, in the ELA/literacy classroom. Throughout the semester, students maintained an ongoing blog where they engaged in critical, metacognitive dialogue about their semester-long experiences composing multimodally.

To guide our analysis of the data, we applied qualitative coding techniques to Elise's compositions and reflections. We first used open coding to note emerging topics and themes and then used those initial codes to construct evolving categories and to work toward axial codes and themes (Saldaña, 2016). We began by initially coding data individually before coming together three times—across the span of two months—to compare, discuss, and refine our initial themes. These refined themes, once agreed upon, were then used to recode all data. Using our code book, we both coded all data separately and finally met to resolve any lingering discrepancies.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from our analysis and provided insight into Elise's perceptions of multimodal composition and her evolving writing teacher identity: the ebb and flow of development; nurturing learning styles; reading multimodality as monomodality; and perceiving multimodality as decoration.

Negotiating Development

While Elise began the semester misunderstanding multimodality, she did, as a result of her experiences in the course, demonstrate important growth as a multimodal literacy student and teacher. Data from the graphic narrative and reflection assignment suggest a complex view of Elise's experiences—the ways in which her growth ebbed and flowed in often uneven ways. In her graphic narrative reflection, Elise described a variety of intentional and sophisticated composing decisions. Discussing her decision to not use color, she pointed to a purposeful choice, sharing, “First and most importantly, I want my graphic novel to appeal to and encompass women and girls without any exclusion. If I had colored the novel, I would have had to make the choice of race and ethnicity in the shading of their skin, hair, and facial features.” Here, Elise demonstrates a complex, if still growing, understanding of the rhetorical situation as it relates to visuals as a mode of communication. She acknowledges her intent and then uses her decision to avoid the use of color to rationalize her approach to a broader audience. Elise also used mentor texts to defend composing decisions. She noted specific texts analyzed in class and pointed to elements she wanted to recreate. Inspired by a guided in-class analysis of the comic *Detective Honeybear*, Elise shared that she borrowed the artists' decision to use black and white as a tool for drawing readers' attention to specific characters. Her ability to point specifically to how and where she borrowed a composition move, in this case from a published comic book, demonstrates (1) a more nuanced understanding of how authors' ideas are communal and drawn from and through one another and (2) an ability to recognize the successful multimodal composition of others.

Elise also articulated what she did during various compositions and why and how the course influenced her thinking. She noted, for example, “...the intense higher thinking graphic novel reading and composing encourages...” and that the “...assignment and class concept as a whole challenged my original notion of graphic novels and comics simply being entertaining for young boys.” Through the course and related assignments, Elise developed a newfound respect for and view of graphic novels and multimodality as complex and worthy of academic use. When discussing the potential of teaching graphic narratives with her future students, she shared how “...composition such as this forces [students] to think much more deeply about the subject matter” and that the assignment “would be beneficial in deepening understanding of character development...” In addition to viewing graphic novels and similar texts as school-worthy, she also positions them as

fostering critical thinking in students. However, Elise sometimes devalued multimodal composing by discussing it as “informal” and less rigorous than traditional literacy. Elise shared that she “struggled with making the dialogue sound normal opposed to formal. I guess since I am usually writing formally for papers and such, writing realistic, believable dialogue was out of my comfort zone.” Elise’s experiences serve as a reminder to composition teachers that writer identity development, especially with regard to multimodality, is non-linear and complicated by the competition between existing and evolving beliefs.

Previously, we’ve written about Elise and her use of “I can’t draw” as a hedging statement (Cook & Sams, 2018), and while she made similar comments in her graphic narrative reflection, she also went beyond that to more specifically discuss how the act of drawing did not align with her rhetorical intent. In other words, Elise felt that drawing (as a mode of communication) did not provide her the tools to effectively address her rhetorical situation. In this case, Elise did not feel she could use drawing and images to ‘say’ what she had to say, suggesting that her perception of her drawing skills as lacking may work to interfere with both her composing process and her positioning of drawing as a viable and school-worthy mode of communication. Adding to the complexity of her earlier statement (“I can’t draw”) and belief about drawing and the use of visuals as an effective and school appropriate communicative approach, Elise grew during the graphic narrative assignment to both recognize the potentialities of multimodal composition and draw on multimodal concepts in rhetorically powerful ways. Elise’s competing statements around modal choices suggest that traditional definitions of academic literacy are deeply ingrained in our students, making it difficult, but certainly not impossible, to reimagine school literacy to include multimodality.

Elise appears to occupy two worlds simultaneously: one where she is able to clearly discuss rhetorical intent and a value for multimodality, and another where she struggles with aesthetics and viewing other modes of communication as equal to alphabetic text. This finding aligns with Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermund’s (2000) position that teacher identity is a constantly negotiated process, and as Smagorinsky et al. (2004) point out, PSTs need time to reflect on and question existing beliefs. Elise’s experiences composing multimodally, specifically the graphic narrative, worked to, if ever so slightly, challenge her existing conceptions of literacy instruction.

Nurturing Learning Styles

Throughout the data, Elise invoked the language of “learning styles” in her work, prompting us to wonder about the relationship between her uptake of multimodal literacy instruction and her working knowledge of learning style theory. The readings and course meetings did not feature any discussion of learning styles, yet Elise used learning style concepts to talk about multimodality. Although

learning styles have been largely disproven via experimental studies, the lore behind them can be persuasive for teachers and teacher candidates.

Learning styles theory suggests that people can be classified as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008). The “meshing hypothesis” argues that people learn best when they receive instruction in their preferred mode of learning (e.g., auditory learners learn best by hearing). In an often-cited study, Pashler et al. (2008) found no compelling evidence for the existence of learning styles, noting that “the contrast between the enormous popularity of the learning-styles approach within education and the lack of credible evidence is...striking and disturbing” (p. 117). Many people have preferences with regard to how information is presented to them; researchers, however, are unable to demonstrate any links between preferences and learning aptitude.

Regardless, Elise frequently noted that students have unique learning styles and that the teacher’s role is to identify those needs and adapt instruction accordingly. As a result, she often championed teacher-centered instruction and viewed students “monomodally.” In her diagnostic essay, for instance, Elise noted that a successful teacher “acknowledges all aspects of a student [and] all aspects of modes of information portrayal.” In other words, a teacher knows how to convey information in unique ways (modes) to help students learn.

Later in the diagnostic, she wrote, “every student learns differently; therefore, as a teacher recognizes each student’s best route to successful learning, they must recognize the adequate instruction to provide in order to steer the student to this route.” For Elise, the best routes to learning are synonymous with learning style pathways. The ideal teacher, for Elise, “tweaks” teacher-centered instruction to include various “modes” to meet student needs. While these excerpts reinforce Elise’s attraction to traditional pedagogy (the lecture, the PowerPoint), they also point to her conviction that a good teacher is aware that students have unique learning needs (a preferred mode) and that teachers adjust instruction to meet those singular needs.

Teaching multimodal composition was a way for Elise to recognize and meet the unique learning needs of students. Elise wrote in her blog that, “Assessing the learning styles of my students will lead to the ideal multimodal literacies for my classroom one day as I shape my multimodal compositions around what will best encourage learning for each of my students.” Later in her blog, she referenced a learning styles article that argues for auditory learning as a preferred learning style of many adults. She reflects: “Because of these statistics and because of my passion towards the pursuit of accommodating for all of my students in order to ensure they each learn the best that they can, I recognize the importance of multimodal texts in terms of auditory components.” For Elise, learning multimodal composition offered her a way to meet the needs of all her students, a prospect affording her joy and excitement: “just as acknowledging all aspects of a student stand as pivotal in

successful education, acknowledging all aspects of modes of information portrayal stands as pivotal in successful educational instruction as well.”

Learning styles theory persists because it seems to flow logically from positive and defensible premises: that students are unique and that instruction should be adjusted to the needs of learners. Over 90% of educators in a 2012 survey believed in learning styles, echoing Elise’s stance on learning styles and preferred modes (Dekker, Lee, Howard-Jones, & Jolles, 2012). She believes that students learn best when teachers present information in a preferred mode. This profoundly influenced how she thought about multimodal composition and instruction and the role of the teacher.

Multimodality as Monomodality

The course readings and conversations defined multimodality as the intersection and layering of multiple forms of communication to create and share information. Elise, however, often considered each modality in isolation and discussed any one mode as a stand-alone way of composing. By misreading multimodality as a collection of mono-modalities, Elise misunderstood and perhaps subconsciously devalued its communicative potential.

Complicating her understanding of multimodality is her view of each mode offering a “best” way of learning for individual students (as we noted above). In other words, rather than viewing multimodality as a plural and interrelated concept, she appears to understand it in singular, isolated terms. In the previous section, we shared how Elise often used the phrase “learning styles” and assumed each student learned in a unique way. She believes multimodal teaching occurs when teachers select the mode that each student learns best with. Such thinking overly simplifies multimodality and ultimately places the teacher in the precarious position of always needing to adapt and change instruction to make learning ‘easy’ and ‘best-suited’ to students’ singular needs. In this way, Elise has perhaps painted the picture of the student as a kind of fossil with already predetermined and ossified learning pathways. This is, in many ways, less about Elise and her beliefs and more about literacy education and the often-traditional composition instruction that takes place across secondary and postsecondary contexts. Such an indictment requires teacher educators to pause and seriously consider how we are preparing writing teachers and the types of writing teachers we want our PSTs to become when they enter their own classrooms.

Throughout the study, Elise referred to herself as a visual learner, which became a mono-modal lens for viewing her future students and multimodality more generally. She positioned multimodality as teacher-centered, not something her students can do, but rather something she would give to them. Early in the semester, Elise reflected on how multimodal literacy instruction could support student learning: “Every student learns differently; therefore, as a teacher recognizes each

students' best route to successful learning, they must recognize the adequate instruction to provide in order to steer the student to this route." She took that idea further by pointing to her own goal or responsibility as a teacher: "Encompassing various modes in my compositions as a teacher will better encompass all of my students as I strive to include every student and every student's best chances to learn." Elise's perspective on individual, best learning styles, again, speaks directly to the preparation of ELA and literacy teachers and the ways we, no doubt, contribute to the misreading of multimodality and the mythologizing of singular learning pathways for individual students.

In the audio essay, Elise opened with statistics related to diversity of learners and learning styles. Similar to her diagnostic, she linked multimodal reading and writing to learning styles and meeting the needs of every student. She stated, "I...recognize the importance of centering every piece of multimodal curriculum around my students' needs and how they will learn the most successfully." These considerations of "best" ways of learning and of providing students the singular approach they need continued in Elise's discussions of herself as a composer and learner. When discussing her own challenges as a composer in the course, as part of her final reflection, Elise mentioned the audio essay "because of how little I learn through auditory means as far as personal learning style." In contrast, she described the graphic narrative as the composition she most valued "because of my personal bias in that I am almost completely a visual learner." It seems that Elise is misreading multimodality as a collection of singular methods of communicating, rather than as a complex system of overlapping and interwoven communicative approaches, which may contribute to the conflation with 'best' learning styles.

Elise's view of multimodality as various mono-modes is intricately tied to her belief that each student has a singular (or best) way of learning. Much of this may be understood as manifestations of Elise's existing literacy beliefs (Ajayi, 2009; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). Negotiating and developing teacher identity, especially in ways that depart from one's current conceptions of literacy instruction, is an ongoing process involving negotiation (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000) and is continuously reconstructed over time (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). The data suggest that Elise is using her experiences as a student and her understandings of teachers and teaching and projecting them onto her teacher education experiences and what she believes her future classroom and students will need.

Multimodality as Decoration

In addition to the ways Elise demonstrated and negotiated development of herself as a multimodal writer and teacher, she also experienced a variety of challenges and barriers to that growth. Across the data set, Elise positioned

multimodal reading and writing as fun and enjoyable *and* less rigorous than traditional academic literacy practices. Elise often foregrounded her pleasure and enjoyment when composing the graphic narrative. She “add[ed] embellishments, shading, or attempt[ed] to perfect the characters on the page,” which enabled her to “enjoy the creativity of tweaking little things and adding glimmers of personality to the [composition].” Her descriptions of multimodal composition as more enjoyable than useful for academic and formal composing purposes positions multimodality as extra to the writing that traditionally takes place in classrooms.

While noting them as fun and enjoyable, Elise, even if unintentionally, devalued essential elements of multimodal composing in her word choices: embellishments, tweaking, little things, glimmers. When she noted from the same reflection that “expressing my ideas **stood** as highly important” and “as an English major, I recognize the importance in acknowledging and embracing the power of words,” she privileges abstract thought and print-centric communication compared to her earlier devaluation of multimodal processes. In this example, key elements of multimodal communication are literally *after thoughts*.

Another way Elise positioned multimodality as decoration was in relation to how she imagined teacher-centered classrooms in her assignments, which interfered with how she interpreted and applied multimodal concepts. In her audio essay, for example, Elise quoted a favorite passage from Troy Hicks’ *Crafting Digital Writing*: “If we use multimodal compositions to simply ‘recreate teacher-centered instruction, we are not using its power to our students’ advantage.’ This quote embodies my stance on multimodality.” Elise’s initial ideas about multimodal teaching, however, are examples of the teacher-centered instruction Hicks warns about. In the diagnostic essay, she noted how visuals support student learning:

I am a highly visual learner though, so because of this, I very much appreciate learning that incorporates visual aspects...I tend to draw pictures to help me remember information while I study, and all of my notes are extremely color coded and highlighted; therefore, I look forward to being able to compose multimodal texts for my students that not only incorporate a lot of visual aides in instruction, but also other modes such as audio.

Elise oversimplifies the notion of a ‘mode’ and conflates it with learner preferences, and she imagines that incorporating additional modes of communication will support students as they study to recall information.

In her audio essay, she interviewed friends about their learning preferences and how teachers can accommodate those preferences. Elise’s questions assume teacher-centered classrooms. To a self-reported visual learner, Elise asked, “if your teacher has a lot of pictures embedded in PowerPoint [slides] would this help you

pay attention in class?...If they explained a process through pictures and graphs would this help you retain information better?” Here, Elise may be drawing on previous experiences as a student, where multimodality was limited and often used as aids or supplements to traditional ways of teaching and learning. This way of thinking works to slow down her uptake of multimodal concepts and of expanding her understanding of composition to include much more than traditional, alpha-numeric text. After noting that another friend is an “auditory learner,” Elise asked, “if a teacher or professor sent out a weekly review podcast on the week’s curriculum...would [she] find it useful for retaining information?” Her friend responded affirmatively and added, “I could listen to it [the podcast] as many times as needed...before a test.” In these examples, multimodality is again positioned as a study guide or supplemental resource to help students achieve the real learning in class. These examples strongly suggest that, contrary to the tenor of course readings and conversations, Elise thought about multimodality in teacher-centered ways; believed that every student has a preferred mode of learning; and imagined that adding one mode to traditional instruction can create rich multimodal environments.

Aligning with previous research on the literacy learning of PSTs, Elise likely summoned the teacher-centered experiences of her K-12 schooling to make sense of new concepts and ideas (Ajayi, 2009; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). Our data suggest that Elise’s existing beliefs about the primacy of print-text and traditional academic discourses caused interference with her learning of multimodal concepts. She is in the process of remapping her teaching and writing identities across a shifting borderland (Alsup, 2019) of personal and professional discourses composed of sometimes contradictory concepts and beliefs. As she negotiates these competing centers of gravity (Smagorinsky, Rhym, & Moore, 2013), Elise revises or maintains what she believes about composition, literacy, and teaching.

Discussion and Implications

Across the data, four major themes emerged and provided insight into Elise’s experiences with and perceptions of multimodal composition: her negotiation of the ebb and flow of multimodal development; her discussions of nurturing and accommodating learning styles; her reading of multimodality as monomodality; and her perception of multimodality as decorative. First, although she sometimes subtly devalued multimodal composition during the course, Elise also displayed growth and learning. She evolved in her thinking about and use of multimodal composition. She made a variety of sophisticated rhetorical decisions and began to share a new belief that multimodality is complex and useful for all students. Elise’s multimodal compositions across the course were, in the instructor’s view, powerful rhetorical appeals. Elise was often a successful composer, but the data suggests she struggled to recognize that herself, or she

simply did not view those composing experiences as representative of what she believed to be academic writing.

Second, Elise, at times, invoked learning styles when imagining multimodal composition in her classroom. This construction supported the mono-modal lens she used to describe herself and her future students. Third, and connected to learning styles concepts, Elise constructed multimodality as a collection of mono-modes. She struggled to see the power of multimodality as the intersection and overlap of various modes of communication. Fourth, Elise described multimodality as fun and often “less than” traditional academic literacy. Her words and beliefs positioned multimodality as decorative compared to what she viewed as the real substance of traditional literacies. In other words, she often described varying modalities and multimodality as supplemental to traditional classroom modes and instruction.

Our analysis of the data and Elise’s experiences suggest that taking a course designed around multimodal literacy holds real potential for teacher candidates, as both writers and future teachers of writing. Such a course can provide PSTs with space to learn about new and non-traditional ways of communicating, to wrestle with new concepts and language associated with multimodality, and to begin considering how these experiences will influence their future instruction. The data suggests that Elise expanded her views on writing to include multimodality, developed purposeful and complex multimodal composition skills, and gained some clarity on how she might incorporate multimodal composition in her future classroom to foster complex, critical thinking in her students. That said, the all-too-often traditional literacy and composing experiences PSTs bring with them (via secondary and university education) can serve as barriers to multimodal literacy learning. Adding additional complexity, making multimodality part of only one course obviously contributes to the struggles PSTs like Elise experience.

The findings from this study point to a variety of implications for teacher education and considerations for secondary writing instruction. Throughout the semester, Elise displayed evidence of an evolving understanding of multimodality and literacy instruction, yet she often undermined her growth in a variety of ways. These instances of simultaneous struggle and growth, of ebb and flow, are fascinating and generative for the field. Echoing previous research in writing teacher education (Whitney, 2009), students like Elise need multiple and ongoing opportunities to compose as students and to observe and design multimodal ELA and literacy instruction. Elise (and many PSTs like her), when imagining and planning multimodal instruction, may privilege inherited traditional pedagogies that center alphabetic text and teacher authority. These discourses, as Elise’s case illustrates, may cause continued interference when learning about multimodal literacy.

Elise's experiences suggest that PSTs' relationship to learning multimodal concepts and practicing multimodal literacy instruction may be, for many reasons, uneven and complicated as they traverse the borderland discourse of writing teacher identity (Alsup, 2019). With this in mind, ELA teacher educators should provide PSTs multiple opportunities to practice multimodal literacy and apprentice with teachers who value multimodal instruction. Teacher educators should also be aware of the subtle ways PSTs devalue multimodal composition, which can adversely influence their learning over time. Making substantive changes to ELA and literacy instruction, as suggested in this study, must begin in teacher education programs to push PSTs beyond their experiences with traditional definitions of literacy and what counts as school-worthy composition.

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