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

Erin Laverick, University of Findlay

As a doctoral student, I was required to take a course entitled Computer Mediated Writing Theory. In this class, we explored the research and theory behind computers and composition and how technology (re)defines the role of writing teachers in a higher educational setting. Unfamiliar with the technology and the pedagogy behind multimodal compositions, I felt alone, frustrated, and overwhelmed. I was focused on learning how to use the technology that I failed to learn the main objective of the course—the pedagogy behind multimodal compositions. A few years later, I was assigned to teach several sections of first-year writing with large populations of English language learners (ELLs) at The University of Findlay (UF)—a private, comprehensive university in northwest Ohio. The director of UF’s writing program announced instructors were “encouraged” to include one multimodal assignment into their courses. The projects would be included in the students’ portfolios, which are assessed by the English department faculty at the end of each semester. In her article, “Taking a Traditional Composition Program ‘Multimodal,’” Christine Tulley, director of the UF writing program, introduces the multimodal assignments as part of the first-year writing curriculum. “As a Director of Writing, I ideally envisioned a writing program where first-year composition courses could have the same standard, including requiring students to choose their own technology. I also knew it was time for me to apply what I learned in graduate school and design multimodal projects for my students to complete in the first-year writing course. Little did I know, this move would serve me well when I began directing the Intensive English Language program (IELP) on UF’s campus. Therefore, in this article, I share some statistical data and personal observations from implementing a multimodal composition in a first-year writing course made up of primarily ELLs and how I used this experience to implement multimodal compositions into UF’s IELP curriculum.

Going Multimodal

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

Benefits for ELLs

Overall, the assignment offered ELLs additional tools for communicating with an audience, rather than depending solely on the written word. A student from Saudi Arabia commented he enjoyed presenting his work and “explaining for an audience and talking to them because it makes me explain my idea clearly.” Likewise Dong Shin and Tony Cimasko argue, “Multimodal approaches to composition provide writers who are having difficulty in using language, including those writers for whom English is a second language (ESL), with powerful tools for sharing knowledge and self-expression” (377). Takayoshi and Selfe argue digital texts cross “geo-political, linguistic, and cultural borders” (2). As the semester advanced, I was beginning to understand how multimodal compositions help ELLs better communicate and revise their written work, allowing them to cross-linguistic borders and best communicate with diverse audiences through multiple channels. And I was beginning to think that like writing a traditional paper, UF’s IELP would benefit from implementing multimodal assignments in its curriculum. While there is limited research about using multimodal compositions with ELLs, let alone using them in an entire curriculum, I thought it might be worth a try. What follows is an account of how I designed a new curriculum to include multimodal compositions in the literature no model for instructors or administrators to follow when designing and implementing multimodal compositions for ELLs, my hope is for colleagues to borrow, tweak, and modify the process presented in this article. I began by reading sources that present pedagogically sound rationale for using specific multimodal assignments with ELLs. For example, Stein calls for using images such as photographs to help ELLs make meaning and improve their language skills (335). Skinner and Haggard focus on using digital narratives as a means for ELLs to develop their social identities and engage in new literacy practices (12). Benson also argues digital storytelling “…is also an engaging project for the ESL class utilizing numerous academic language skills, such as the expression of voice through story creation, process writing, researching, and citing sources with the use of technology” (8). In addition, Nelson finds that students take on greater ownership when designing their own compositions. Knowledge of a specific writing mode, they argued, is a form of self-knowledge, which will aid in revisions and visually, and of the ability to design complimentary relations of meaning among these modes, represents a potent communication combination indeed” (63). Thus multimodal compositions offer ELLs multiple channels to communicate, which is even more helpful when preparing an ELL for his/her academic studies. For example, if a student struggles with writing, she will find it beneficial to include pictures or audio clips to effectively communicate his/her points. Based on the existing research and my experience teaching first-year writing, I knew it was time for the IELP to go multimodal.

Support for Faculty

With these curricular revisions, came the need to train faculty so they could use the technology and recognize the pedagogy behind multimodal assignments. With limited time, I decided to implement several informal in-services into our faculty meetings. Also, to ensure faculty had the necessary resources, I purchased materials for department use at the end of each fiscal year. For example, we now have a department laptop, projector, 15 flip cameras, and 30 clickers. Faculty need not seek out resources; they are all at their fingertips. If they require technology training, the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) on campus can assist as well. Angela Crow writes, “If we’re setting up environments that are smart for learning, we shouldn’t place people [faculty] in the position of having to request special materials; we should ask them to select from options, resources that will facilitate their experiences without making these into abilities or disabilities” (116). Purchasing these materials, along with the CTE training, has ensured IELP faculty can focus on teaching the rhetorical and linguistic skills behind the multimodal compositions, rather than worrying about where to find the technology and how to use it. For our first faculty meeting in August 2009, I asked the instructors read Cynthia Selfe’s article “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composition.” In this article, Selfe provides readers with a clear and concise argument for the use of multimodal assignments in composition courses in which she focuses on auralities. She writes: My goal in this article, then, is not to suggest that teachers focus on either writing or aurality, but rather that they respect and encourage students to deploy multiple modalities in skilful ways—written, aural, visual—and that they model a respect for and understanding of the various roles each modality can play in human expression, the formation of individual and group identity, and meaning making. (625-26) Selfe’s suggestions spoke to me as both an instructor and researcher with the understanding that a multimodal approach will facilitate their experiences without making these into abilities or disabilities. I also invited the faculty to attend the first-year writing poster presentations. Most ESL composition teachers favor modeling an instructional strategy in which students analyze sample essays to help them better organize and develop their own writing (Freeman and Freeman 38). Therefore, I decided modeling good teaching practices would be an effective means to introduce the faculty to multimodal compositions. I hoped if I ceased them, the instructors would feel comfortable trying such assignments in their own teaching. And fortunately, at the end of the fall semester, several instructors shared their ideas, asked for advice, and reflected on their experiences with me. Instructors
were more confident and seemed excited about the outcomes of the multimodal assignments.  

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

Revising the Curriculum

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

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

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

Finally, there was no consistency in what was being taught.  When the program was at its largest (250 students), we offered several sections of each level.  Instructors covered different assignments from different textbooks, leaving holes in what was taught in the classroom.  For example, a student once told me she wrote a paper in two different levels of composition.  Thus rather than building on what the students’ learned in previous levels, materials and assignments were recycled and others were not assigned.  Because we didn’t have an assessment plan, students were not held accountable and simply advanced to the next level without a clearly defined set of outcomes.

In regard to the curriculum revisions, the faculty fell into two camps.  One who wanted complete academic freedom to teach whatever they wanted and another who wanted guidance with clear directions of what language skills should be taught and how the skills should be assessed.  As an administrator, I fell in the middle of these camps.  I wanted key assignments and activities that assess specific language assignments, including multimodal assignments, reserved for each level of instruction.  However, I also wanted instructors to have the freedom to teach the assignments in a manner that best suited them and their students.  Therefore, I tailored the IELP’s curriculum after the way Tulley revised UF’s first-year writing program’s curriculum.  Through this approach, faculty maintained academic freedom but also had greater expectations placed on them.  In addition, the faculty was able to meet: the success and downsfalls of the assignments and activities into a new uniform curriculum.  My goal was to implement the instructors’ assignments and activities into a new uniform curriculum.  For example, one instructor asked students tell fairy tales from their native countries using Movie Maker. Another instructor had students create podcasts, using Audacity to help them practice and improve their pronunciation skills. And finally, a third instructor had students read professional journal articles and transcribe written summaries into poster presentations. Students presented the articles, using the posters as visual aids. By the end of the academic year, four out of the six full-time instructors were implementing multimodal assignments into their courses, not only in their writing classes, but also into other language courses such as pronunciation, reading, and communication skills. In addition, the faculty began visiting the CTE more often to learn how to implement new technologies into their classrooms. Slowly, our program’s curriculum began to evolve.

Reflections

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

Author Note: Additional materials that support this project, including student handout, rubrics, and responses are available at: https://ufonline.findley.edu/webapps/cmsmain/webui/xc/1288327.1?action=attach

Works Cited


Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education
Where Writing Happens: Elevating Student Writing Through Digital Storytelling

Jane M. Saunders, Texas State University-San Marcos

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

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

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

The Roots of Digital Storytelling

An increasing body of research is surfacing about the power of digital storytelling as a pedagogical and learning tool for developing student writers (Dreon, Kerper, and Landis 2011; Hull and Katz 2006; Kajder 2004; Ohler, December 2005/January 2006; Robin 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman 2010). Defining digital storytelling is a complex endeavor; typically digital stories include two distinct processes. First, authors write (or type up) a story they want to convey and that they suspect could be matched well with images, music, video, or audio. Authors go through a writing and revising process to hone the story into a short and tightly knit piece and record themselves reading it. Using movie making software like FinalCut Pro, Moviemaker, or imovie, authors drop in the recording and then enhance this by adding images, music, etc. to deepen the viewers’ experience and understanding of the story. With increasingly available movie-making programs arriving in students’ digital spaces, we discovered that where writing happens is not just the English classroom, as many secondary teachers might assume. And, if we want to increase students’ efficacy in writing, it could be useful to look at alternate spaces for writing to occur so that students can better examine their lived experiences, find their voices, and strengthen their writing.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Point (or view)</td>
<td>The story the author is attempting to relate through the movie-making process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Dramatic question</td>
<td>This creates tension and sustains the viewer’s attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Emotional content</td>
<td>This universalizes the experience and helps the viewer connect with the digital story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The gift of your voice</td>
<td>Our voices convey who we are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The truth of your voice</td>
<td>This verifies who we are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The power of the soundtrack</td>
<td>Music and sound effects undergird and strengthen the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Economy</td>
<td>The use of a short enough written text and related multimedia to keep the audience interested without dragging on too long.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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These steps are invaluable in providing a roadmap for the writing process in a digital environment, and offering guidance for students while developing, audio-taping, and piecing together their digital stories.