BALANCING CONVENTION AND CHANGE

IN MULTIMODAL PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT

by

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Thesis Abstract –Idaho State University (2011)

Since the arrival of computers into the composition scene during the late 1970s and early 1980s, computers and composition as a field has had to navigate both convention of the larger composition studies discipline and change brought on by emerging technologies. Multimodal composition is one product of the intersection of computers and composition. While multimodal composition has great potential, it can also distract if not carefully implemented into the composition classroom. In order to effectively integrate multimodality into the composition classroom, teachers must balance convention and change by grounding instruction and assessment on traditional rhetorical pedagogy while also addressing the affordances unique to each communication mode.

**Chapter 1**

**Growing Pains: Possibilities and Problems Presented by**

**Multimodality in Twenty-first-century Composition**

In keeping with the rapidly evolving technology that the field embraces, the discipline of computers and composition has undergone dramatic change. Computers emerged onto the composition scene in the late 1970s with the advent of word processors and personal PCs. Akin to the changes brought by earlier writing technologies such as pencils and the typewriter, word processors and personal computers (PCs) transformed composition in that alphabetic texts became much easier to produce, edit, and distribute. Despite these changes, those who taught and studied computers and composition emphasized traditional linear texts through the 1980s, until the dawn of hypertexts, email, MUDs, and MOOs in the 1990s. Linear texts have a distinct beginning, middle, and ending. In contrast, non-linear texts involve texts which incorporate many different paths or threads. Linear arguments tend to be very logic-based while nonlinear arguments are often more association-based. Nevertheless, while these new platforms broke away from traditional linear models, they were still grounded in alphabetic text since written words were the primary means of communication.

Within the last ten years, however, new and affordable multimedia technologies and Web 2.0 (a platform used to share entirely digital texts) have altered scholarship and practice in computers and composition, and the field has increasingly embraced multimodal texts. More so than hypertexts, multimodal composition challenges traditional notions of alphabetic text and its dominance in composition classrooms. To

understand how this latest composition movement challenges traditional notions of writing, let me introduce two definitions vital to this study.

The term "multimodal," also referred to as "new media texts" in composition studies, is problematic in that it evolves with the introduction of new technologies. For my thesis, "multimodal" composition will be defined as "involving texts [both alphabetic and non-alphabetic] that combine words, still and moving images, sound, [or] animation" (Anderson et al. 78). Whether it is alphabetic text, images, sound, or animation, each communication mode has its own unique properties.  These unique capabilities are called "affordances," which Cynthia Selfe defines as,

> The particular representation capabilities associated with a mode of composing. Video, for instance, is particularly capable of representing movement, process, and the passage of time. Audio has the capability of representing accent, tone of voice, mood, or music. An affordance of alphabetic writing is the ability to represent linear propositional logic in structures like sentences and paragraphs. ("Glossary" 193)

"Affordance" is a key term for understanding multimodality. To get at the heart of each communication mode, the composer must explore its individual affordances, making form complement content and vice versa. Because traditional composition classrooms reflect the affordances of alphabetic writing, composition instructors may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the affordances of different communications modes. Katherine Blake Yancey argues that much of the discomfort accompanying multimodality stems from its challenge to our "stable" concept of composing. Whereas composition

instructors used to have a "stable definition of composing and the author," multimodality is changing this concept. Yancey further compares the anxiety created by multimodality to "discovering that the tectonic plates underlying the continents are not stable but, in fact, are shifting constantly" ("Made" 317).

Great potential and promise accompanies this latest shift in composition studies. Proponents of multimodality such as Cynthia Selfe, Pamela Takayoshi, Lester Faigley, and Charles Moran state that multimodality expands and enriches traditional composition practices. Selfe and Takayoshi contend that multimodal composition centers composition more firmly upon its Classical roots in rhetoric since it encourages writers to "use *all available rhetorical means* of communication" in order to reach multiple audiences for multiple situations (6). Like Selfe and Takayoshi, Faigley sees no valid reason why composition studies should be limited to alphabetic text: "We have no justification aside from disciplinary baggage to restrict our conception of rhetoric to words alone. More important, this expansion is necessary if we are to make good on our claims of preparing students to engage in public discourse" ("Challenge" 187). Faigley, Selfe, and Takayoshi capture what so many advocates of multimodality argue. In expanding their conceptions of texts and considering multiple communication modes, instructors better prepare students to face the demands of composing in the twenty-first century.

Moran believes that such an expansion is crucial for composition studies to remain relevant in upcoming years. Moran attests that "as professionals in the field of English, we have painted ourselves into a small corner" by limiting composition studies to the written word ("Powerful Medicine" 64). In expanding to multimodal composition,

composition studies can escape from the metaphorical corner and find "a way of widening our field, of taking more of the world into our field of vision, of enlarging and invigorating the subject of English" ("Powerful Medicine" 64). Still, although multimodal composing challenges traditional notions of composition as alphabetic text, it does not displace this earlier concept altogether. As Moran argues, supporters of multimodality envision it as a means of "enlarging and invigorating" composition studies.

The proponents' argument should not be construed to say that all multimodal composing is created equal. When misapplied in the composition classroom, multimodality can distract instructors and writers from important writing concepts. Critics have commented that when multimodality is not properly applied in the classroom, new media projects often become mere "bells and whistles" used to entertain rather than instruct (Rodrigues qtd. in Inman 196; Hesse 605). As Raymond Rodrigues and Greg Siering suggest in their interviews with James Inman, if those within computers and composition do not take on the task of evaluating the effective use of multimodal composition, they risk regressing to a "marginal group" and becoming "alienated" from the rest of the composition field (196, 232).

In order to avoid the "bells and whistles" spoken of by Rodrigues, Siering, and Hesse, it is crucial that instructors actively evaluate their use of multimodality and effectively apply it in the classroom—a task currently difficult due to a lack of guidelines for effectively integrating multimodality into composition classes. According to a 2006 study conducted by six composition experts, university composition instructors have limited if any professional development opportunities on integrating technology into their

classrooms. The study revealed a lack of "comprehensive, cohesive, or effective professional development opportunities offered by their departments or universities" (Anderson et al. 79). Textbooks that effectively apply computers and multimodality to composition classrooms are also lacking (Anderson et al. 79). Faigley acknowledges similar difficulties faced by instructors as they attempt to integrate multimodality into their classes:

> Only a tiny percentage of writing teachers have had any training in graphic design. Although a large body of useful work in professional and technical writing and document design over the past twenty years is beginning to find its way into mainstream composition textbooks, few writing teachers have any sense of how to sequence a curriculum that would include some instruction in design.... In spite of these difficulties, student work will be increasingly in multimedia forms. ("Challenge" 178)

For the most part, instructors in computers and composition receive very little support and must be self-taught if they wish to incorporate multimodality into their writing courses.

In response to this dearth of support, there have been many calls to action in the field of computers and composition. Composition professors such as Kristine Blair, Meredith Grauper, Lee Nickoson-Massey, and Richard Colby have emphasized the need for instructors to evaluate their use of multimodal technologies in composition classrooms (Blair, Grauper, and Nickoson-Massey 14-15; Colby iii). Likewise, Susan Grover asks that composition professors at this unique point in history carefully consider

how conventional practices of the past should influence composition changes in the

future (195). In my thesis, I interpret these statements to be calls for research that

examines the role of change and convention in successfully incorporating multimodality

into composition classrooms.

Specifically, my thesis will answer Blair, Grauper, and Nickoson-Massey's as well

as Colby's and Grover's calls for action by considering best practices for multimodal

composition.  I propose that to effectively integrate multimodality into the composition

classroom, instructors must balance both convention and change by grounding instruction

and assessment in traditional rhetorical pedagogy while also addressing the affordances

unique to each communication mode.  I acknowledge that research has been conducted

on multimodality outside the field of computers and composition. For this thesis,

however, I am delimiting my study to the discipline of computers and composition. As a

specialist in composition studies, I argue that this focus will enable me to develop further

expertise in computers and composition and allow me to best serve fellow instructors

who share my interest in multimodal composing.

Chapter 2 of this thesis is a review of the literature which examines how change

and convention have historically been important to scholars in the discipline of computers

and composition. Chapter 3 narrows the thesis' focus to examine how composition

instructors can ground multimodal instruction in traditional writing pedagogy while also

allowing for affordances of different communication modes. This chapter begins with

theory and then ends an example and analysis of how experts exemplify this theory.

Chapter 4 further examines the roll of convention in change, extending it to the

assessment of multimodal texts. Chapter 4, likewise, begins with theory and ends with an example from an expert multimodal instructor. Chapter 5 draws from the research of the preceding chapters to offer best practice recommendations as well as suggests areas of further research.

**Chapter 2**

**Computers and Composition: A History of Convention *and* Change**

Soon after the advent of PCs and word processors in the 1970s, a new field

emerged within the larger discipline of composition and rhetoric. This new area came to

be called "computers and composition." The field of computers and composition grew

out of a continued interest in "The Fifth C," a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the

Conference on College Composition and Communication, known among composition

specialists as "Four C's" (Moran, "Technology" 206). Synonymous with the field of

composition and rhetoric, Four C's had been established in 1949 by college and

university instructors to advance the theory, practice, and teaching of written and oral

composing. The formal teaching and practice of composing had existed for centuries

under the name of "rhetoric." However, with the emergence of specialized fields of study

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ancient field of rhetoric

diminished in importance, moving from the center of Western education to one or two

"composition" and "speech" courses required of most college freshmen. Four C's sought

to change this loss of status. Soon after the organization was founded, its members

established an annual convention and a peer-reviewed journal, *College Composition and

Communication*, both meant to disseminate knowledge about the field and to increase the

level of respect for their discipline (Petit).

Naming their group "The Fifth C," those interested in computers and composition

echoed their predecessors' goals. Recognizing the increasing importance of computer

technology to composing, specialists in computers and composition saw their work not as

a mere SIG within the larger field of composition and rhetoric but potentially as a

separate area of study. Just as members of Four C's had created the journals, conventions,

and organizations required of a discipline, in 1983, editors Cynthia Selfe and Kathleen

Kiefer published the first issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Computers and Composition*

(Moran, "Technology" 206). Apart from this publication, computers and composition as a

discipline would eventually grow to have its own annual Computers and Writing

Conference, its own "area cluster" at the annual Four C's convention, and additional peer-

reviewed (and strictly online) journals such as *Kairos* and *Computers and Composition*

*Online*. Through these means, those within computers and composition sought to define

the borders of a new field, one subsumed under composition and rhetoric but with an

identifiable history, publications, membership, conferences, and other markers of a

discipline. Thus, from its beginnings, computers and composition has been a field

continually balancing conventions of traditional rhetorical study with the change of a new

communication medium. To fully understand the need for convention and change in

multimodal composition, it is helpful to see how the dynamic between these factors has

manifested itself throughout computer and composition's brief but rich history.

As the field's name would suggest, computers and composition has evolved along

with the technology it embraces. In their landmark work *Computers and the Teaching of*

*Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994: A History*, Gail Hawisher, Paul

LeBlanc, Charles Moran, and Cynthia Selfe assert that computers entered the American

classroom during the late 1970s and early 1980s (18). Due to articles such as *Newsweek's*

1975 "Why Johnny Can't Write," and a 1974 report by the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) showing a decline in writing skills, the "Writing Crisis"

became a major focus in college English departments (19). Accordingly, many within

composition and rhetoric turned to computers as tools to improve writing instruction.

With the release of word processors such as *WordStar*, the most successful commercial

word processor through the mid-1980s, a growing number of writers began to use

computers in the composing process (Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe 18; Bergin).

Much of the research during the 1980s focused on how computers aid writers in

the "writing process" (Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe 23). Like many others

within computers and composition, Hawisher initially focused on the role of the word

processor in composition classrooms. Hawisher's 1986 dissertation is entitled *The Effects*

*of Word Processing on the Revision Strategies of College Students (Computer Writing).*

For her study, she examined 4,048 essays written by advanced college freshman.

Participants were required to submit a first draft, revision plan, and final draft. She aimed

to "discover not only whether students revise more extensively with the computer than

with pen and typewriter but also whether they revise more successfully" (Hawisher, *The*

*Effects*). While her study did not show a significant improvement or regression in

revising with computers as opposed to revising without, Hawisher's dissertation is

significant in that it reflects that specialists were actively studying and questioning the

effectiveness of computers in the writing process. Specialists such as Hawisher were

looking for a change, an improvement, in their students' abilities to write conventional

academic texts. Two years later, Hawisher encouraged the use of a computer daybook in

which students record their thoughts on the writing process and their progress or

frustration with composing via computers. In her 1988 article "The Computer Daybook: A Multifaceted Tool," Hawisher repeatedly emphasized the importance of not only teaching students how to write but also teaching students how to write using a word processor—a practice often preached by other computer advocates (71-72).

Similarly, Cynthia Selfe also encourages teaching the rhetoric of computers in addition to writing. In 1988, Selfe draws attention to the new rhetorical conventions involved in this new medium. In "The Humanization of Computers: Forget Technology, Remember Literacy," she notes a "new and distinct set of 'grammatical' conventions" and that teachers must equip students to deal with "multilayered literacy demands" (70). To address these new literacy requirements, she warns that "without careful preparation the introduction of computers can create two separate and competing camps—those who have access to computers and those who do not" (69). A similar theme is found in her 1992 article "Re-Defining Literacy: The Multi-Layered Grammars of Computers," in which Selfe again discusses the need for teachers to guide their students through the multiple grammars associated with computer screens, word processors, networks, and keyboards (18). It is significant that Selfe, like many other technology advocates, cautions teachers not to blindly assume that computers solve all composition problems. Instead, she acknowledges that computers often cause new problems. She argues that computers have great potential for empowering students; nevertheless, teachers must also be aware of and plan for possible challenges that naturally arise with the use of a new rhetoric—a rhetoric of technology.

Throughout these studies by Hawisher and Selfe in the 1980s and early 1990s, the

focus was twofold: (1) teaching students to effectively create conventional alphabetic text documents and (2) helping students navigate the new technologies they were expected to use to produce these documents. While students during this time period focused on writing conventional linear, alphabetic texts, they were also exploring new technologies in hopes of improving their writing. Computers and composition specialists continued to focus on linear texts and word processing until the early to mid-1990s, when electronic hypertext, email, and MUDs or Multi-User Domains, all of which are published digitally, began to emerge (Inman 112-114). Although these new technologies shifted away from traditional linear approaches to text and communication, they were still completely alphabetic text-based. In 1994, Hawisher discusses the rhetorical and literacy implications of hypertext in "Blinding Insights: Classification Schemes and Software for Literacy Instruction." Due to its nonlinear format, hypertext "can exist in electronic form only—it has no counterpart in print" (47). This expansion from printed text to digital text marks a notable shift for the field of computers and composition. The computer was no longer thought of as just another means for creating printed text much like the printing press or typewriter. Instead, the computer was a platform for communication in and of itself.

Digital text as a mode for communication is furthered by electronic mail. Gail Hawisher teamed up with Charles Moran in 1993 to discuss the previously ignored rhetoric of email in "Electronic Mail and the Writing Instructor" (627). When using this new medium of mail, they explain that "the writer needs to pay extraordinary attention to such matters as length, structure, and 'title' or 'header'" (630). Traditional texts develop

argument primarily through the text itself. In contrast, the visual rhetoric behind email greatly impacts its reception. Hawisher and Moran note that due to its rapid production and consumption, the layout of an email greatly affects how much of the message is actually read (630). This phenomenon along with journalistic trends in writing has intensified the importance of visual rhetoric in written composing. The visual layout of emails critically influences which words or phrases the reader will focus on the most. Digital composers must be aware of the fast pace of email and thus write their text to account for skimming.

Despite the advancing technology and communication forms, experts such as Hawisher, Selfe, and Moran still discussed the role of word processors and low-end technology in the mid to late 1990s (Hawisher, "Blinding" 49; Moran and Selfe 48). Thus, even though new digital texts were emerging at this time, word processing and printed text were not necessarily replaced but expanded upon. As Hawisher articulates, "the progression [of composition technology] is not linear—that word processing, communication programs, and theories of literacy and learning do not follow one upon another but rather exist in a dialectical collaboration" ("Blinding" 49). In this quotation, Hawisher illustrates computers and composition's tendency to embrace both printed text and digital communication; in other words, her statement indicates that convention and change have long coexisted within the field. The 1990s marked a significant change or expansion in the concept of text. While traditional linear texts were still taught, non-linear forms were also introduced. The non-linear format of digital texts brought with it an interest in rhetorical choices behind layout and design.  Though non-linear texts mark a

significant change in composition practices, it is important to note that most student

compositions during the 1990s were still entirely alphabetic. Composing in the field of

computers and composition was still thought of as only written composing.

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked composition's entry into the "multimedia"

and "multimodal" realm. Inman defines "multimedia" as "the electronic presentation of

several digital media, like graphics and audio and video clips, as well as more traditional

print formations" (114). As Inman's words suggest, traditional print has not been

discarded in this most recent composition trend but accompanied by an additional

emphasis on visual, aural, and oral rhetorics. Gail Hawisher's 2000 article "Constructing

Our Identities through Online Images" illustrates these additions. She discusses the role

of visual communication on the World Wide Web as a growing number of women

represent themselves visually and verbally (549). Hawisher suggests that on the Web,

images and visual rhetoric are as effective modes of composition as alphabetic text. The

women discussed in Hawisher's article did not abandon alphabetic textual communication

altogether but accompanied written text with visual digital images to more fully convey

their meaning.

The women portrayed in Hawisher's 2000 article wrote in a highly collaborative

writing space. Such collaboration is common in multimodal texts. With the development

of Web 2.0, it has become easier to share these multimedia compositions and collaborate

throughout their creation. In the fall 2009 online edition of *Computers and Composition*,

Michael Day, Randall McClure, and Mike Palmquist describe new writing possibilities

"in which the Web is seen as a social, collaborative, and collective space." Collaboration

is not a new concept in composition and rhetoric, and these new technologies add to a long tradition of collaborative theory and instruction.

However, besides drawing on former pedagogies such as collaboration, new technologies brought about a disruption of earlier pedagogies and philosophical underpinnings. According to Lester Faigley, these collaborative technologies have "forced" composition teachers to "devise new pedagogies because the traditional lines of authority had to be renegotiated" ("Literacy" 35). Charles Moran likewise talks of the shift of emphasis from direct teacher instruction to a more student-centered classroom. He claims that computer classrooms have caused an evolution in teaching practices: "In these classrooms [computer lab classrooms] the teacher is responsible for structuring the students' writing activities, but generally the teacher is not in the center of these activities" ("From a High-Tech" 18). Many composition classrooms have moved from teacher-centered instruction to a more learner-centered instruction in which the professor is a collaborating advisor on creative and rhetorical decisions.

As we move further into the twenty-first century, research and scholarship within computers and composition becomes more and more centered on multimodality. The roots of multimodal theory stem from the New London Group's 2000 publication *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (Ball, "Designerly" 394). In this influential publication, the New London Group calls for composition studies to expand its focus from an entirely "alphabetic emphasis" to one of multiple modalities (Ball, "Designerly" 394). Since the New London Group's publication, composition specialists, particularly those within computers and composition, have explored the

incorporation of multimodalities in the composition classroom.

Multimodal composition advocates seek to expand society's notion of literacy and texts to move beyond entirely alphabetic works. For example, Cynthia Selfe, a major proponent of multimedia composing, contends that instructors need to redefine what they consider as composition:

> Indeed, I suggest we need to pay attention to *both* writing *and* aurality, *and* other composing modalities, as well. . . . 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 and the effectiveness of our instruction for many students. ("Movement of Air" 618)

Selfe is not arguing that composition teachers completely abandon convention (in this case, written composition) but rather expand what is taught to include alternate modalities of communication. In short, Selfe asserts that composition should no longer be limited to alphabetic text. Her article suggests that with technologies such as digital cameras, digital voice recorders, podcasts, audio blogs, *iMovie*, and *Moviemaker*, students are poised to engage in previously "undervalued" multimodal composition as they never have before ("Movement of Air" 617). Selfe presents composition specialists with a changed view of the composition classroom—one that retains alphabetic text but that is now also high tech, exploring and redefining assumptions about what "composition" really is. Cheryl Ball and Byron Hawk have noted a similar expansion in

concepts of composing. In their introduction to a 2006 special issue of *Computers and Composition*, Ball and Hawk assert that scholars within the discipline of computers and composition have moved from "linguistic to visual meaning-making, all in digital environments" (263).

It is important to emphasize, however, that multimodal texts are not meant to replace conventional writing altogether. Selfe argues against an "*either* writing *or* aurality" mentality, hoping instead that composition instructors can come to "respect and encourage students to deploy *multiple* modalities in skillful ways" ("Movement of Air" 625-626). Furthermore, practitioners of multimodality contend that it is still important to include writing as one of the modalities taught.  Selfe and Takayoshi write in an introductory chapter to a multimodal handbook for teachers,

> We, too, argue that writing is of vital importance to educated citizens. . . So, it is
> not our purpose to suggest that composition teachers should abandon this belief or
> the practices it suggests. Throughout this book, readers will find that the authors
> include numerous opportunities for written composition, even within the context
> of projects that focus on multimodal composition. (9)

As these statements indicate, traditional writing instruction and pedagogy still play an important part in multimodal classrooms. Multimodal instruction does not replace written instruction, but rather expands it.

Although multimodality has permeated research and scholarship within computers and composition for the last ten years, it has not gone unchallenged. In response to Selfe's "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing,"

Doug Hesse asserts that before composition studies fully embraces multimodality, it must

first ask, "Is the curricular space that our field inhabits 'rhetoric/composing' or is it

'writing/composing'?" (603). Hesse believes that Selfe's aim—and, by extension, the

goal of multimodal studies—is "nothing short of calling for an expansive redefinition . . .

of composition as rhetoric" (603). Such a redefinition is not positive, according to Hesse,

who adds that while he is "inclined" to adopt multimodality, he has to ponder "whether

I'm overstepping or sidestepping professional roles that best serve student and social

interests" (605). Critics such as Hesse fear that multimodality undermines the

longstanding balance of convention and change in computers and composition,

overstepping the bounds of composition and diminishing the quality of writing

instruction.

      In response to such criticism, much of the work devoted to multimodal composing

seeks to justify multimodality's presence in the composition classroom. Gail Hawisher,

Cynthia Selfe, and Pamela Takayoshi discuss the necessity of multimodal texts:

"Whatever profession students hope to enter in the 21st Century—game design,

archeology, science and engineering, the military, the entertainment industry, and

medicine—they can expect to read and be asked to help compose multimodal texts of

various kinds" (Hawisher, Selfe, and Takayoshi qtd. in Denecker). Hawisher, Selfe, and

Takayoshi defend the need for multimodal composing because of its spread through

numerous professions. Cynthia Selfe again defends the teaching of multimodal

composition in her article, "'Convince Me!' Valuing Multimodal Literacies and

Composing Public Service Announcements," co-authored with Richard Selfe. The

Selfes's criticize technology-resistant English professors for their "investment in print as the primary means of expression" ("Convince Me"). They encourage teachers to accept a broader idea of what composition is and to embrace new digital environments such as digital audio and video, blogs, and podcasting. In a later publication, Cynthia Selfe and Takayoshi further this claim, stating that multimodal composition is necessary "if composition instruction is to remain relevant . . . in new digital communication environments" (3). As these vigorous defenses of multimodal composing reveal, proponents of multimodal composition do not see it as an interesting "pet project" or passing trend. Rather, it is a vital tool in preparing students for the future and in securing the field of composition's relevance and esteem.

As previously discussed, composition instructors have very little training available when it comes to incorporating multimodality into their classrooms. However, if these instructors are to succeed, they cannot haphazardly integrate multimodal projects into their courses. If multimodality is to play the role that specialists argue it will—namely, expanding and invigorating composition studies and ensuring its relevance in this new digital era — instructors need guidance in how to successfully implement it. The remaining chapters of this study seek to provide such guidance for composition instructors. In line with computer and composition's rich tradition of balancing convention and change, instructors should continue to balance both convention and change in multimodal composing by grounding instruction and assessment on traditional pedagogy while also addressing the affordances unique to each communication mode. Chapter 3 examines how this balancing act looks in multimodal instructional design.

**Chapter 3**

**"Lest We Think the Revolution is a Revolution":**

**Grounding Multimodality in Writing Pedagogy while Allowing for Affordances**

In 1999, Cynthia Selfe wrote an article entitled "Lest We Think the Revolution is a Revolution." Her title describes a different phenomenon in computers and composition: digital colonization and perpetuation of gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, I would like to apply her title's underlying message to how composition instructors perceive multimodality today. Composition instructors may regard multimodal composition as being entirely revolutionary—and not in a good way. Instructors may believe that if they adopt multimodality into their teaching, they must abandon their former teaching practices and enter the brave new world of rapidly changing technology. Despite multimodality's dominant place in computers and composition scholarship for over a decade, the continuing defense of multimodal composition suggests that there still is an underlying "fear [of] the effects of technology, and the potent changes that it introduces into familiar systems" (Selfe, "Lest" 292). Behind this fear is the assumption that if composition instructors integrate multimodal projects into their classes, they will become technology driven rather than pedagogy driven.

Lest we think that the multimodal revolution is a revolution, I argue that adopting multimodality does not require that instructors abandon sound writing pedagogy. Rather than throw the metaphorical baby out with the bathwater, composition instructors should ground multimodal instruction in familiar, traditional writing pedagogy. In doing so, multimodality can seem less unfamiliar to instructors. Multimodality is an expansion of

instructors' rhetorical scope rather than a threat to traditional teaching philosophies.

Specialists in computers and composition would agree with my position. For example, prominent computers and composition scholars have written about the dangers of a curriculum driven entirely by technology. Pamela Takayoshi and Brian Huot assert in their introduction to *Teaching Writing with Computers*, "For a teacher to adopt technologies on their own strength rather than on their appropriate fit with his or her pedagogical principles is to let technology be too powerful an influence" (5). Clearly, Takayoshi and Huot propose that composition instruction should be pedagogy driven rather than technology driven and further clarify the dangers of an exclusive focus on technology: "Technology for its own sake is dangerous because it can detract attention and energy from other things that need to be accomplished in the class" (5). Takayoshi and Huot's statement is reminiscent of the dangers of "bells and whistles" (Rodrigues qtd. in Inman 196; Hesse 605). Without a solid foundation in conventional writing pedagogy, multimodal projects risk becoming mere decorations or entertaining distractions. When designing multimodal instruction, teachers must understand that they are ultimately in charge, not the technology. Technology is merely a tool to effectively implement sound composition pedagogy (Takayoshi and Huot 5).

According to Cynthia Selfe, instructors sometimes forget their power or "agency" when it comes to determining how and what technologies are integrated into the classroom. She states:

> When teachers/scholars start to believe that such agency is impossible, they forget that they *can* (and, really, *should*) be active and politically active in their own uses

of technology. They forget, for instance, that they *can* (and *should*) contribute to a

humanist vision to the design of computer-supported communication

environments on their campus—especially those environments used by students to

author and/or design online communications. Or, these teachers/scholars might

forget that *students* need to exert agency in electronic environments—that

students often need help in learning how to shape active, productive, thoughtful,

and humane, relationships with computer technology and digital literacies. (qtd. in

Inman 202)

Selfe's comment is important in that it highlights that teachers do not lose their agency to

technology when they adopt multimodal projects. Composition instructors must seize this

agency in order to shape the future of multimodal composition rather than letting

multimodal composition shape them. It is the teacher who must shape classroom

instruction and not computers.

In adopting multimodality, composition instructors need not abandon their former

pedagogical beliefs but rather should ground multimodal teaching in the pedagogies they

already practice. To make multimodal composing seem less foreign, instructors new to a

particular medium can begin by incorporating familiar teaching practices into their

multimodal projects. Kathleen Blake Yancey, for example, encourages instructors to

ground new technologies in familiar contexts and purposes. She believes that while new

technologies frequently do new kinds of work, "it's often easier *to begin trying out the*

*new--* or the unfamiliar-- *by using it to extend what we already do*—that is, to use it in a

familiar context or for a familiar purpose" ("The Pleasures" 107). As Yancey's comments

suggest, multimodal composing becomes less unfamiliar, less daunting, when teachers

expand or extend what they are already doing in more traditional composition

classrooms.

Traditional writing pedagogy is thus an important base for multimodal composing

assignments. At the same time, however, it is important that instructors allow

multimodality to change conventional writing practices rather than allow former practices

to restrict multimodality. Each communication mode has its own rich affordances. When

writers consider the affordances of alphabetic texts alone, they lose their appreciation for

the depth and complexity of multimodal texts.  To avoid this loss, instructors can begin

designing multimodal projects with sound writing pedagogy and then expand this base to

include the affordances of multiple communication modes. For example, Cheryl Ball

similarly views new media texts as a means to enrich current writing practices (Ball and

Moeller, "Reinventing"). In the table below, Ball takes current recommendations from the

*Council of Writing Program Administrators' (*WPA) Statement on Expected Outcomes in

a First-Year Writing Course and then details how this Statement might be enacted in a

new media classroom (See Table 1).

Table 1

Differences between Traditional First-year Writing Course Outcomes and First-year New

Media Course Outcomes

| Writing Outcomes | New Media Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating<br>• Understand a writing assignment as a series | • Use composing and interpretation for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating |

| | |
|---|---|
| of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources<br>• Integrate their own ideas with those of others<br>• Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power<br>• Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality<br>• Understand how genres shape reading and writing<br>• Write in several genres | • Understand a new media assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary materials<br>• Integrate their own ideas with those of others<br>• Understand the relationships among modes of communication (i.e., semiotic resources), knowledge, and power<br>• Adopt appropriate immediacy, emotion, and interface<br>• Understand how modes and media shape interpretation and composition<br>• Compose in multiple media |

Source: Ball, Cheryl E. and Ryan M. Moeller. "Reinventing the Possibilities: Academic Literacy and New Media."

Notice how similar the outcomes are in language and content. Yet, at the same time, Ball's new media outcomes acknowledge multimodal differences. This is one indication that the multimodal projects described in Ball's article would enrich rather than replace traditional text-based curriculum and teaching practices. It is also significant that Ball explicitly claims she bases her multimodal teaching practices upon traditional writing pedagogy (Ball and Moeller, "Reinventing"). Multimodal composition need not threaten an instructor's current teaching practices; it does not demand that they change everything they currently do in the classroom. Rather, successful multimodal composition practices are grounded in traditional and familiar pedagogies already in place. Furthermore, successful practices allow for convention and change, expanding traditional writing pedagogy to consider the affordances of multimodality.

Ball is not alone in asserting that the goals of a multimodal classroom are closely related to those of any other composition course. Selfe and Takayoshi also believe that all

composition instructors, including those who teach in alphabetic classrooms and those who teach in multimodal classrooms, share similar responsibilities:

> In short, whether instructors teach written composition solely or multimodal composition, their job remains essentially the same: to teach students effective, rhetorically based strategies for taking advantage of *all available means* of communicating effectively and productively, to multiple audiences, for different purposes, and using a range of genres. (9)

Thus, good rhetorically based teaching practices are good teaching practices. Regardless of the medium—aural, oral, visual, written, still, or moving— composition instructors' goal is to produce rhetorical thinkers who can effectively compose to best meet their situation, purpose, and audience. With such an end in mind, composition instructors can then "connect all classroom practices, including the use of computers, to relevant and defensible instructional goals" (Takayoshi and Huot 5).

Teachers must focus on guiding student awareness of rhetorical choices when designing multimodal composition instructions. Mickey Hess recommends that teachers design multimodal instruction first by considering theory.  With an examination of theory as the foundation, Hess outlines three essential elements for designing any multimodal assignment: (1) theory—considering why instructors want to incorporate multimodality into their course, which instructional goals the assignment will fulfill, and when to incorporate the assignment, (2) structure and choice—scaffolding the multimodal assignment so as to give the student choices for what they *"can* do" without telling them "what they *must* do," and (3) circulation—considering and publishing multimodal

projects to audiences beyond the confines of the classroom (30). It is noteworthy that

Hess begins with theory. Hess does not endorse blindly incorporating multimodality into

the composition curriculum. Instead, he recommends that instructors carefully consider

which course objectives and pedagogical goals can be met by a multimodal assignment.

Because of each mode's unique affordances, carefully selected multimodal projects can

help a class deepen their understanding of a conventional topic.

Resembling Ball and Yancey, Hess views multimodal composition as an

expansion of a teacher's current pedagogical methods. He believes that perhaps the

greatest benefit of multimodal projects is for instructors and students "to *re-think* what

they know about composing: to test, evaluate, and expand theories" of alphabetic

composing (30). Hess cautions that even as one re-thinks and tests assumptions about

composition, multimodal projects must still fit within existing pedagogies and curriculum

goals (30).  In other words, instructors must navigate change and tradition as they

develop multimodal assignments. By their very nature, sound, video, and still images

have their own unique affordances or capabilities (Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright 13).  How

then can an instructor base multimodality in traditional writing pedagogy while still

taking advantage of the affordances of different communication modes?

To answer this question, my next section examines a multimodal assignment

designed by computers and composition specialists Stephanie Fleischer, Cynthia Selfe,

and Susan Wright. Analyzing this assignment, I will focus on (1) how these specialists

ground multimodality in traditional writing pedagogy, and (2) how they accommodate the

unique affordances of multimodality.

### *Experts in Practice: Audio Autobiography Assignment by Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright*

The first sample assignment, created by Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright, springs from a traditional literacy autobiography that one might expect to find in a first-year writing course. For example, in the 2001 *Scribner Handbook for Writers,* Robert DiYanni and Patrick Hoye recommend that instructors assign "a literacy biography in which [students] explore early reading activities (i.e., reading contests, oral readings, a favorite teacher who read aloud to them regularly) and complete the autobiography with their current likes, dislikes, and practices" (15). Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's autobiography assignment is similar to the one described by DiYanni and Hoye but with an emphasis on sound rather than reading activities. At the beginning of the assignment Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's instructions open with a challenge for students to "compose an audio essay that explores the role of sound in your own personal literacy history and that will help class members gain a broader understanding of your literacy practices and values" (19). This opening statement captures a conventional emphasis on autobiography and literacy while simultaneously embodying change as it extends students' notion of literacy to include sound.

Throughout the assignment, Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright continue to blend convention and change.  In order to better understand how Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright incorporate traditional writing pedagogy, it is helpful to draw from Erika Lindemann's recommendation for successful writing assignments. Lindemann counsels writing instructors that effective assignments must "take into account at least five rhetorical features: student engagement with the subject, purpose of composing, audience, student

role in relation to subject and audience, and form of discourse" (qtd. in Hess 31). All five

of Lindemann's traditional rhetorical features are present in this assignment. First, the

student personally engages the subject since they create an autobiography in which they

actively question and examine their own assumptions and beliefs. Furthermore, the

purpose of the assignment is not just self-discovery but connection with an audience

since students must help their peers gain a "broader understanding" of their literacy

practices and values. The opening instructions also clearly spell out the form of discourse.

The student is to create an autobiography using sound. It is clear in Fleischer, Selfe, and

Wright's instructions that the audience is not limited to the instructor, but encompasses

the entire class. The audio essays are meant to be listened to by more than just the

composer and teacher. Accordingly, the student has a unique relationship with the

audience and subject matter; the author is not simply sharing impersonal facts but rather

inviting the audience to explore a personal facet of his or her own life.

Apart from this strong foundation on traditional rhetorical pedagogy, Fleischer,

Selfe, and Wright also incorporate traditional alphabetic writing in their multimodal

assignment. The instructions state that the student will "need to do quite a bit of writing:

taking notes, making outlines, writing a script, reflecting on your draft for completed

essays" (20). Many of the pre-writing tasks that Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright espouse are

the same prewriting tasks typically found in a traditional composition classroom. Just as

in the traditional classroom, Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright want their students to employ

alphabetic prewriting, in this case to draft their oral compositions. Furthermore, there is

accountability for students' prewriting. The instructions tell students that they "should

hand in all the written materials that support your project" (21). Such a specification lets

students know that the alphabetic prewrite is required.  Other written components of the

assignment include a storyboard complete with scene-by-scene outline, interview

questions (if applicable), lists of "sounds/people/activities" they need to record, citations

of downloaded audio clips, and a reflection on a draft (21). Though the end product is a

five minute audio clip, this multimodal project incorporates a good deal of alphabetic

text.

Nevertheless, while the assignment is conventional in certain rhetorical and

written aspects, it also breaks away from alphabetic texts and challenges students' notions

of literacy. Due to our educational system's emphasis on alphabetic text, it is safe to

assume that most students connect literacy with written words. In asking students to

explore the role of *sound* in their literacy histories, Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright are asking

students to expand their notion of literacy to include aurality. Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright

acknowledge that such an expansion will pose a challenge to many students. Whereas

many students have "considerable experience choosing topics for written essays," few

students will have thought about how to "choose, and focus on topics in ways that take

advantage of the particular affordances of sound" (18).   To aid students in designing their

topics, Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright provide the students with the following clarification

written in bold, "This project should not simply record and reproduce sounds. Rather, it

should use sound to tell a story, make meaning about, create some commentary on, offer

some insight into your literacy practices and values" (19). This statement gives students

plenty of room to individualize their projects while also making it clear that the topic

must center on their literacy practices and values. Since multimodality is new to so many students, Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright carefully scaffold the composing process by providing six sample sound portraits, audio documentaries, and soundscapes that demonstrate appropriate topics and "meaningful" sound. These examples help students develop ideas for their multimodal texts and model what "good" audio texts sound like.

The next section of Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's assignment continues to balance convention and change. The assignment specifies three additional requirements. Two of these specifications align with a traditional literacy autobiography: (1) the project must lend insight to some of the class-wide discussions of literacy and (2) the project must also have some "meaningful connection" to students' literacy practices. The last specification, in contrast, deals specifically with multimodality: "The project should employ the affordances (capabilities) of the medium and mode(s) in effective rhetorical ways" (21). Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright challenge their students to use the required mode of communication to complement the topic. The affordances of an audio essay fit well the topic of *sound* in their own literacy practices. Such a requirement challenges students to consider how delivery, tone, silence, different narrators, and music can be used rhetorically. Students have been traditionally required to consider rhetorical uses of words. In Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's assignment, students are required to expand their consideration to words and delivery.

Because of this focus on words and delivery, Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's assignment invites students to employ not only ethos and logos, but also pathos. Selfe and Takayoshi argue that students are often taught to emphasize logos and ethos in their

written compositions "while devaluing pathos as an ethical or intellectual strategy for appealing to an audience" (5). The more personal nature of sound and the broader audience (entire class rather than teacher/student) promotes a student's personal and emotional engagement with their multimodal text (4). Because of such a connection, Selfe and Takayoshi assert that multimodal compositions can help student writers tap a previously neglected trait in composition: pathos (4).

Similarly, Ball and Moeller contend that multimodal composing gives students and scholars a creative outlet not typically found in scholarly writing. Ball and Moeller assert that in new media texts authors "regularly draw on both scholarly and creative genres to construct their arguments ("Converging"). In so doing, they bridge disciplinary boundaries that have "split English departments in the past" ("Converging"). Traditionally, writing has either been scholarly or creative. In contrast, multimodal composition uses text, images, sound, and design in such a way that the composer has more leeway to express their scholarly research in a meaningful and creative manner. Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's autobiography assignment gives the student a chance for scholarly investigation into their own literacy practices while also allowing and encouraging them to express their own deep emotional connections to the topic.

Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright's assignment exhibits a strong foundation in traditional writing pedagogy while also encouraging students to engage with multimodal affordances. Such a multimodal assignment structure can go a long way in scaffolding student learning. Even so, strong assignment design may fall short of helping students make the transition from alphabetic to multimodal texts. Even though multimodal goals

and underlying rhetorical principals are similar to traditional alphabetic composition, students (and teachers) often have less exposure to other mediums such as visual or oral and thus need clear structure and knowledge of what is expected of them.

Such structure is clarified and tightened through rubrics and means of assessment to guide their projects. Furthermore, as previously discussed, multimodality is an expansion of current composition practices. When students compose multimodal texts, they employ multiple communication modes each with their unique affordances. Since students lack familiarity about many of these affordances, assessment—especially formative assessment— is paramount for establishing expectations of "good" multimodal texts. Chapter 4 provides recommendations for designing and implementing multimodal assessment.

**Chapter 4**

**Balancing Convention and Change in Assessing Multimodal Texts**

Assessment of multimodal texts can be baffling for both instructors and students.

For example, professors Anne Herrington and Charles Moran report feeling "distracted"

and "disjointed" the first time they graded non-linear hypertexts (248). Herrington and

Moran add that assessment of nontraditional texts is just as foreign to students as it is to

instructors. While students have been exposed to criteria for assessing academic

alphabetic texts since high school, most students will have little to no exposure to criteria

for considering multimodal texts (252). Accordingly, since "our criteria for reading

academic hypertexts [and new media texts] have no history at all," it is paramount that

teachers follow Herrington and Moran's recommendation that "we need to be clear about

what it is that we want and expect, and we need to communicate these criteria clearly to

our students" (252). Similarly, Sonya Borton and Brian Huot maintain that since students

"are likely to have less experience authoring, designing, and thinking rhetorically about

multimodal texts," it is even more important that they have clear formative assessment to

help them meet classroom expectations (101). For designing multimodal assessment, I

offer four recommendations: (1) base assessment on rhetorical principles, (2) create

criteria specific to the multimodal project which take into consideration its affordances,

(3) design formative and summative assessments to help scaffold project, and (4)

personally try composing a multimodal composition before assessing students'

multimodal projects.

### *Rhetorically Based Assessment*

Based in my preceding review of the literature, I postulate that multimodality does not entail dismissing past writing practices but rather expanding upon them. Within this premise, conventional assessment practices provide a good starting point for developing criteria for multimodal assessment. According to a survey of 162 computers and composition teachers conducted by Anderson et al., 100% of their respondents included the assessment criterion that the "message be appropriately shaped for the rhetorical situation (purpose, audience, context)" (70). Clearly, conventional rhetorical theory is an important framework for not only designing multimodal assignments but also assessing these assignments.

On the importance of basing multimodal assessment on rhetorical principles, Borton and Huot conclude: "Rhetorically based understandings of composition should *drive* and *inform* teachers' approach to assessment in multimodal composition classrooms" (99). In order to create unity between instruction and assessment, assessment should not be removed from teaching practices. In grounding multimodal composition in conventional rhetorical pedagogy, it is important to also base its assessment on the same rhetorical principles. Borton and Huot further argue that founding multimodal assessment on traditional rhetorical assessment can help instructors review students' multimodal projects with more confidence: "In assessing multimodal texts, teachers need not find themselves at a loss, nor should they resign themselves to starting from scratch. Smart teachers will use what they already know about rhetorical theory and practice to assess multimodal texts effectively" (110). In other words, to make multimodal assessment less

foreign and unnerving, effective teachers draw on past experience as a starting place to assess student multimodal projects.

Similarly, Herrington and Moran specify that teachers should develop "rhetorical-trait" assessment criteria (252). They further assert that although hypertexts are nonlinear (a trait shared with many other multimodal forms), claims still need to be well argued and supported. Some of Herrington and Moran's more conventional rhetorical criteria include focus, evidence, organization, documentation, style, and grammar (249). All six of these criteria could be found in a conventional, alphabetically-based classroom. However, when applied to multimodal projects, such criteria take on a new light.

For example, Herrington and Moran acknowledge that organization must differ when considering hypertexts rather than traditional printed texts. Printed texts rely on a heavily linear structure to maintain their cohesion and organization. In contrast, if a hypertext follows too closely a linear model, then it is "not fully utilizing the potential of the medium" (250). Rather than evaluating linear logical progression, Herrington and Moran evaluate the menu for organization as well as the "means of navigation provided us by the author" and "the integrity and coherence of each page and of the full site" (250).

As another example distinguishing what organization suggests in assessing multimodal composition, Yancey discusses the organization of a well done PowerPoint presentation in which the author melded audio, text, and graphics. Yancey writes that it was the "patterning of information—putting the verbal and the visual in dialogue together" that ultimately created coherence for the piece ("Looking" 94). Likewise, the

organization of an audio essay will be much different than that of a typewritten assignment. The audience of a written text can rely on headings and subheadings and even refer back to the thesis statement for organizational clues. Audio essays, in contrast, do not have the visual advantage of a traditional written text.  For that reason, the composer of an audio essay will have to rely on repeated phrases, tone, and even music to help the listeners make connections and distinctions between ideas, particularly if the piece is a longer one. In each of these examples, organization and coherence resulted from rhetorical decisions about how text and the affordances of other communication modes should interact with one another.

However, besides organization referring to logical linear structures, conventional assessment criterion often evaluates the coherence between content and form. According to such a definition, the criterion of coherence especially applies to multimodal assessment. Reconsider how multimodality has previously been defined in this thesis. Multimodal composition has been defined as "involving texts [both alphabetic and non-alphabetic] that combine words, still and moving images, sound, [or] animation" (Anderson et al. 78). Inherent in the name and definition of multimodal texts is the idea that a single composition can combine multiple modes of communication. Because multimodal compositions incorporate these multiple modes, they possess great potential for exploring the relationships between these different modes. Takayoshi discusses how the relationship between two different modes lends itself well to a rhetorical analysis: "The relationship between content (words and their meaning) and form (the way those words are arranged on the page) becomes more foreground as an area of rhetorical

in(ter)vention" (246). Although Takayoshi's remarks focus on the visual layout of digital composition, all multimodal projects have a complex relationship between content and form.  By grounding assessment in rhetorical theory, instructors can help students better understand the complex relationship between content and form.

While traditional assessment theory is a good place to start, it is important that instructors extend that rhetorical theory to consider the individual affordances, or capabilities, of each mode of communication. Madeleine Sorapure captures the need for balance between convention and change in the following statement:

> A broadly rhetorical approach can accommodate [multimodal] differences—that is, an approach that focuses assessment on how effectively the project addresses a specific audience to achieve a specific purpose. The weakness of a broad rhetorical approach is that it doesn't in itself offer any specific guidance or criteria for handling the multimodal aspects of the composition. ("Between")

If multimodal projects are to become more than text with a fancy embellishment or entertaining picture, assessment needs to encourage students to consider the depth and potential of the mode in which they are composing.

### Assessing Multimodal Affordances

Because of the wide variety of modes that contemporary technology offers composition students, the idea of affordances is particularly important to assessment of multimodal texts. The term "affordances" is used in multimodal studies to describe the unique capabilities associated with each composing mode. For example, Cynthia Selfe notes that the affordances of video include its ability to represent "movement, process,

and the passage of time." Likewise, Selfe describes that audio is particularly capable of expressing "accent, tone of voice, mood, or music" ("Glossary" 193). The author of a successful multimodal text must explore its individual affordances; otherwise, the form will not complement the content. Similar to Selfe, Yancey also perceives content and form in a complex relationship: "Digital compositions *weave* words and context and images: They are exercises in *ordered complexity*—and complex in some different ways than print precisely because they include more kinds of *threads*" ("Looking" 95). Found in Yancey's words is the idea that modes are neither separate nor independent in multimodal compositions but rather woven, tightly relying on one another to build the meaning of the piece. To help students embrace this complexity, assessment criteria should not only include conventional rhetorical theory. Although conventional theory is a good place to start, it must be expanded to consider the affordances of each individual mode.

While the affordances of each mode are deeply connected to the content, composition instructors' evaluation of multimodal texts does not always reflect that relationship. In "Designerly ≠ Readerly," Cheryl Ball calls for new ways to interpret and analyze texts as composition studies shifts from purely alphabetic writing to composing in multiple media. She contends that current rubrics and assessments consider design separately from "literary, rhetorical, and aesthetic traditions" (394). Limiting assessment to conventional criteria may help readers see how and why a multimodal text was created but falls short of helping readers understand the text in a way "useful to writing studies" (397). Ball's argument suggests that when instructors separate design from content in

their assessment of multimodal texts, they fail to acknowledge the complexities of the piece and thus inadvertently undervalue the relationship between communication modes. Design becomes more of a decorative side note rather than an important element situated within a larger literary, rhetorical, and aesthetic tradition. If multimodality is to become "useful" and accepted in writing studies outside of the computers and composition field, our assessment of multimodal texts needs to address their rich and unique complexities.

When composition instructors separately assess design from content, it is often the result of insecurity with assessing multimodality. For example, Sorapure describes a common assessment strategy in which a reflective essay or report is assigned to accompany a multimodal project. This reflective essay is then used "wholly or mostly" to grade the project. While a reflective essay can complement multimodal projects, basing the grade primarily off the written text merely "avoids assessing the new media work on its own, and in general reflects uneasiness with assessing something other than a written text" ("Between."). Such avoidance is a disservice to composition students. When instructors assess multimodality in the way described by Sorapure, it sends a message to the students that the alphabetic composition is the one that really matters. If the written essay alone is graded, the multimodal part of the assignment risks becoming a trendy but irrelevant exercise. Instead of evaluating only the written component of a multimodal project, Sorapure recommends that composition instructors "attend to the differences between digital and print compositions in order to be able to see accurately and respond effectively to the kind of work our students create in new media" ("Between"). When instructors directly address affordances of new communication modes, assessment

becomes more accurate and effective for student compositions.

Two examples of directly addressing the affordances of multimodality are found in Herrington and Moran's "Evaluating Hypertexts" and Yancey's "Looking for Coherence in a Postmodern World: Notes toward a New Assessment Design." As previously discussed, Herrington and Moran recommend using conventional and new assessment criteria. In contrast to their traditional criteria (i.e., "Organization/Coherence" and "Syntax/Style"), Herrington and Moran's last criterion is specific to hypertexts (249). Herrington and Moran's final assessment criterion is "Graphic/Design," which entails "choice of fonts, page layout, and choice of colors" (249). In applying this criterion, Herrington and Moran examine whether the design and navigation complement or add depth to the alphabetic meaning of the text or whether these elements are a distraction or gimmick (251).

Yancey likewise encourages teachers to use assessment criteria specific to the communication mode. One of Yancey's conditions for assessment is that "we specify what the digital makes possible and what we intend it for—or an assessment informed by intent, effect, awareness, and design" ("Looking" 93). Yancey's assessment criteria aim to address the *why*, *what*, and *how*. In examining "intent" of the digital text, the instructor encourages the composer to consider why they chose that specific mode of communication. Including the "effect" in assessment encourages composers to consider what effect they want their mode of communication to have on their audience. Likewise, assessment of "awareness" and "design" prods composers to consider how affordances of the mode will help them reach their rhetorical goals. If assessment criteria, rubrics, and

guides are made available with these expectations early in the composing process, students will have a better idea of how to make their chosen mode of communication more meaningful.

The purpose of assessment criteria is to help instructors evaluate multimodal texts as well as to help students know what to explore and emphasize. Because students are likely unfamiliar with how multimodal texts will be assessed (Herrington and Moran 252; Borton and Huot 101), it is imperative that assessment is utilized throughout the composing process. Formative assessments are crucial for multimodal assignments since they can guide students in utilizing affordances and making rhetorical decisions in new and unfamiliar composing modes.

### *Scaffolding Multimodality through Formative Assessments*

In his article "Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom," Brian Huot argues that grades, tests, and assessment have too commonly been thought of as one and the same (163, 166). Huot contends that such a belief devalues the role of assessment in instruction and does little to encourage thoughtful revising (165, 168). Huot recommends that students and teachers work to develop a "shared discourse for understanding assessment as a positive force for teaching and writing" (165). To create such shared discourse, formative evaluations are crucial (167).

Assessment is traditionally broken down into two types: summative assessment and formative assessment. Huot defines summative assessment as graded work that exists "outside of a context in which a student might improve his or her work" (167). He differentiates this type of assessment from formative assessment, which he defines as

"judgments that allow the student to improve" (167). Summative grades are in many ways a necessary evil. Summative assessment is part of a teacher's responsibility to communicate student competency to stakeholders such as future employers. While such grading has a purpose, it focuses students' attention on "what will get them a desired grade" rather than on what will make them a better writer (168). To counteract this grade fixation and to restore students' attention to becoming better writers, formative evaluation carefully integrated into day-to-day instruction can give students guidance and direction.

Guidance and direction are important for any composition assignment; however, these factors are especially needed for multimodal assignments. Composing in multiple modes is a foreign process for many if not most students. Unless multimodal instruction and assessment is carefully structured, students are likely to use non-alphabetic modes as "decorations to a primarily textual rhetoric" (Wickliff and Yancey 184). Regular formative assessment facilitates student performance by clarifying expectations about multimodality's vast rhetorical possibilities. Huot outlines one such exercise in which students and instructors work together to create "rhetorical and linguistic" targets to best reach their audience and purpose. Once these targets are established, both students and instructors engage in periodic formative assessment to determine how well students are meeting these goals (171). Borton and Huot similarly espouse a formative and collaborative approach in multimodal classrooms because this method is an "effective way to make sure that students understand the role of rhetoric" in multimodal as well as conventional texts (101). As instructors and students develop rhetorical criteria together and then regularly assess their progress in light of these criteria, students develop

awareness of the rhetorical goals important to their communication mode and strategies for effectively assessing their own composing.

Nevertheless, although formative assessment is an important part of the composing process, it is important to not overstep the bounds of formative assessment. For example, many software programs include tools such as "Track Changes" that enable instructors to easily give digital feedback. As cautioned by Yancey, instructors must be aware of the dangers of too much feedback. Yancey describes an instructor who was excited about the "ease" with which she could respond to her students' digital compositions. Because of this ease, the instructor "inadvertently took over student texts and her comments *became* the texts. . . . Responding became rewriting, a rewriting she did not engage in when responding to student work with the technology of the pencil" ("Looking" 93). Instructors may be tempted to give excessive amounts of feedback in order to share possibilities of multimodal composition. Feedback is an important part of formative assessments; nonetheless, it is crucial that teachers still let students maintain ownership of their texts.

When used effectively, formative assessment can aid students throughout the process of creating multimodal texts. Borton and Huot claim that formative assessment helps "to focus students' attention on a rhetorical understanding of a text as they are in the process of composing it" (100). Furthermore, when grading criteria and rhetorical goals are made clear to students early in the assignment, students and teachers are more prepared to evaluate the "rhetorical effectiveness" of the final products through summative assessment (100). Thus, successful formative assessment leads to a richer

summative assessment of the final product. When clearly defined, assessment helps students better understand the rhetorical choices they need to make for a successful multimodal piece.

Takayoshi promotes a similar connection between instruction and assessment. She maintains that as professors change and adapt assessment, they must also consider "the ways assessment is tied with *teaching* electronic texts" ("The Shape" 254). As maintained by Huot, Borton, and Takayoshi, assessment is not an isolated grade given at the end of a project but rather an instructive tool best used throughout the composing process. Formative assessments are essential for scaffolding multimodal composing projects; however, it can be difficult to create and implement meaningful formative assessments without first experiencing multimodal composing on a personal level.

### *Experiencing Multimodal Texts on a Personal Level*

Instructors within traditional alphabetic classrooms have had a great deal of experience writing the same type of texts that they teach. Such experience aids these instructors in creating assessments for alphabetic texts. Often, instructors know what skills to assess because they have been practicing these skills for years. In contrast, many teachers who want to incorporate multimodality have limited experience composing such texts in an academic environment. For instance, in her publication, "Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship," Cheryl Ball discusses difficulties faced by online peer-reviewed journals as they seek to gain esteem similar to their printed counterparts (404). Ball asserts that while scholars are interested in multimodal composition, few actually compose in multiple modes themselves: "It is evident from the scholarship

available that compositionists are interested in new media. Yet, they do not seem to value

creating new media texts for scholarly publications to explore the multimodal capabilities

of new technologies" (407).

Such a stark contrast between the interest in new media texts and the lack of

experience many scholars have in writing such texts seems paradoxical. If

teachers/scholars expect their students to explore multimodality in a meaningful way,

shouldn't they also be willing to compose in multiple modes? Participating in multimodal

composition can increase instructors' ability to assess texts while also providing students

with a model. Selfe argues that personal multimodal composing demonstrates for students

the importance of multimodal texts in the twenty-first century:

> I might, in fact, go farther with this point, suggesting that faculty in rhetoric and
>
> composition should serve as role models in this regard, showing students that
>
> they, too, are willing to learn new ways of composing, to expand their own skills
>
> and abilities beyond the alphabetic by practicing with different modalities of
>
> expression that may be unfamiliar and difficult but increasingly expected and
>
> valuable in different twenty-first century rhetorical contexts both in and out of the
>
> academy. ("Response" 608)

According to Ball and Selfe, multimodal composition should not be limited to classroom

assignments but rather become an integral part of composition studies itself. There are

many peer-reviewed journals available for composition specialists to publish scholarly

multimodal texts such as *Kairos*, *The Fibreculture Journal*, and *Computers and*

*Composition Online*.

Borton and Huot maintain that in practicing multimodal composition, teachers become more effective in their assessment of such texts (103). As Borton and Huot observe, the most effective teachers of multimodality are those who have struggled through the complexities of multimodal composing. Thus, Borton and Huot claim that instructors who had "learned to design and produce at least one website [were] more effective in structuring assignments that help students create and evaluate webtexts" (103). With this said, it is important to note that in order to teach multimodality, instructors need not become web design experts overnight. Teachers unfamiliar with web design can start with audio essays or other technologies with which they are more comfortable. Similarly, instructors who wish to incorporate visual and written rhetoric, but feel uncomfortable with video equipment, can begin by creating effective PowerPoint presentations. Once their confidence improves and they become more familiar with different communication modes, instructors can branch out to new and unfamiliar technologies. Instructors can even compose with their students. In a collaborative environment, teachers can help students understand the rhetorical choices they have to make for each medium. In return, students, who may be more technologically savvy than their instructors, can help teachers understand some of the more technical aspects of a communication mode. Regardless of which route instructors chose to take, it is important that they try multimodal composing for themselves so that they can assess with more confidence and insight into their students' work.

Initially, the prospect of assessing multimodal texts may seem daunting; however, the task becomes more manageable when instructors begin with traditional rhetorical

assessment strategies and then expand those strategies to incorporate the affordances of multimodality. Putting these strategies to the test, instructors are more prepared to assess multimodal texts once they themselves try composing in multiple modes. Furthermore, since assessment of multimodal texts is new to instructors and students, formative assessment can provide a useful tool for establishing and clarifying expectations of high-quality multimodal texts. To better understand how these principles would look in practice, my next section analyzes a formative assessment by composition specialist Dirk Remley to see how he balances conventional rhetorical assessment and assessment of multimodal affordances.

### *Expert in Practice: Assessing Multimodal PowerPoint Slide Shows by Remley*

In a recent issue of *Computers and Composition Online*, Dirk Remley uses a webtext to describe his methodology for assessing PowerPoint presentations in an advanced writing course for nursing majors. PowerPoint presentations can incorporate written text, still and possibly moving images, and sound. I selected Remley's assessment approach because he considers all four aspects that I recommend for assessment. Namely, Remley includes conventional rhetorical theory and multimodal affordances in his assessment criteria, he engages in formative assessment, and he personally composed a scholarly multimodal webtext outlining his experiences assessing multimodal texts. Since all four of my assessment recommendations are present in Remley's webtext, this examination will provide the reader with a concrete example of how my recommendations look in practice.

In designing the formative assessment for his class's PowerPoints, Remley

conscientiously selects a mixture of traditional assessment criteria and multimodal-specific criteria.  Throughout his webtext, Remley provides background information about how and why he designed his assessment methods. In the section "Approaches to Assessing PPT," Remley discusses how he uses a blend of rhetorical principles and multimodal affordance-based criteria to assess his students' work. Remley maintains that "many of the same rhetorical principles that apply to print-linguistic representations can also apply to multimodal texts." For example, the idea of "transitions" and "detailed descriptions" carries over to "examples, sound, music, color, and/or word choice." Remley begins with traditional alphabetic criteria and then extends it to the affordances of multimodality. In order to clarify for his students, Remley used a table which listed traditional print-text criteria along with multimodal design criteria   (see Table 2).

Table 2

Criteria Used to Assess Multimodal PowerPoint Presentations

| TRADITIONAL PRINT-TEXT CRITERIA | MULTIMODAL DESIGN CRITERIA |
| --- | --- |
| Focus | Size of text/image |
| Organization | Use of Space |
| Development | Contrast between text/image and background |
| Mechanics | Synthesis of image and narration |

Source. Remley, Dirk. "The Practice of Assessing Multimodal PowerPoint Slide Shows."


In including "traditional print-text criteria" for assessment, Remley affirms the notion that traditional writing practices are still expected and required in academic multimodal projects. In addition, the "multimodal design criteria" help students better understand the importance of rhetorically choosing color, sound, audio, and spacing. Notice that in

Remley's rubric, one column is not emphasized over the other column; both have the same number of criteria and are positioned side-by-side in a uniform text size and font. The layout of Remley's rubric acts as a subtle reminder that visual and aural design holds the same importance as alphabetic text in multimodal compositions.

Furthermore, Remley states that accompanying this table, he also provides students feedback on how the audio complements the alphabetic text and graphics of their work. He encourages students to limit the amount of text presented on each slide, thus not overwhelming the viewer with information while at the same time discussing each topic in depth via the verbal track. He further asserts that narration should not simply "repeat text on the slide, as if the speaker is reading a slide" but rather provide new insight and build upon the written text. Throughout Remley's formative assessment, his comments to students offer guidance on how to make rhetorical decisions about balancing different modes of communication.

Remley's criteria help students see that multimodal composition involves traditional elements as well as new affordances that accompany PowerPoint technologies. In my opinion, although his rubric succeeds in many ways, it falters when it separates conventional alphabetic criteria from multimodal criteria. Cheryl Ball contends that in separating content from form, assessment falls short of examining the text's "rhetorical situation" ("Designerly" 393). In describing "focus," "organization," "development," and "mechanics" as applying only to "print-text," Remley suggests that such rhetorical elements are limited to alphabetic text alone. Such a separation seems to contradict his earlier claim that "many of the same rhetorical principles that apply to print-linguistic

representations can also apply to multimodal texts." Remley's last criterion, "synthesis of image and narration," does enable students to consider the relationship between visual and oral modes of communication; however, it falls short of extending that consideration to the relationships among oral, visual, and written texts. Rather than separate traditional criteria as being *only* applicable to alphabetic text, it is important to apply traditional rhetorical criteria to other modes of communication as well.

The assessment shared in Remley's webtext was primarily formative assessment. Discussing why he uses formative feedback, Remley states that formative feedback best helps his students foster a rhetorical understanding of the text. Whereas summative feedback often motivates students to focus entirely on the grade, formative feedback is used to help students better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their piece. Remley emphasizes the importance of praise in formative assessment: "So, when a teacher observes something a student has done well, she should acknowledge it. Doing so helps offer encouragement." In balancing critique with praise, Remley encourages his students while also instructing them on how to refine their multimodal texts.

Finally, instead of assigning but not composing multimodal texts, Remley models scholarly multimodal composition for his students. Remley's article is in the form of a webtext. *Kairos* defines "webtexts" as "projects developed with specific attention to the World Wide Web as a publishing medium" ("Submissions"). In his text, Remley integrates many of the same elements as his students' presentations. Similar to his students, Remley incorporates sound, color, text, and images as well as an additional hypertext element. Moreover, the act of personally composing a multimodal text

emphasizes to Remley's students that multimodal texts are important to his scholarly pursuits and have relevance outside of the classroom.

As exemplified by Remley, multimodal assessment draws from traditional rhetorical assessment criteria and also from criteria specific to multimodal affordances. At its best, multimodal assessment doesn't limit rhetorical criteria to alphabetic texts. Instead, multimodal assessments should challenge students to explore the complex relationship between modes of communication. Rhetorical choices extend to both alphabetic and non-alphabetic modes. Since students are unfamiliar with non-alphabetic texts, formative assessment is critical for developing a student's rhetorical understanding of the multimodal piece. In addition, clear formative assessment throughout the composing process makes assessment a more meaningful part of the learning process. Lastly, when designing multimodal assessment, it is advantageous for instructors to experience first-hand multimodal composing. Instructors who are willing to compose multimodal texts are better prepared to provide assessment and also demonstrate for their students the importance of scholarly multimodal compositions.

**Chapter 5**

**Convention and Change: Road Signs for Teaching Multimodal Composition**

Since the arrival of computers onto the composition scene during the late 1970s and early 1980s, computers and composition as a field has had to negotiate both the conventions of the larger discipline of composition and rhetoric and the changes brought on by emerging technologies. The intersection between computers and composition is a complex and evolving relationship. To capture the complex relationship between computers and composition, I draw on Susan Grover's metaphor in which she compares this intersection to a roundabout:

> At a glance, [the intersection between computers and composition] suggests studying the effect of computer technology on composition. However, the relationship between computer technology and composition is more complex than a simple cause-effect relationship. Instead, computer technology and composition shape one another in a complex relationship. Because of the multiple factors involved at this crossroads between computers and composition, a roundabout metaphor with many streams of traffic is a more apt metaphor than that of a simple traffic intersection. . . . This [complex] intersection does require some sort of response from composition professors. Where we position ourselves now will determine the course of our discipline in the future. (8-9)

Similar to drivers entering large urban roundabouts, composition teachers must consider their entry point, their positioning in the intersection, and their desired outcome. Such considerations are particularly true of developing multimodal composition assignments.

Considering traditional convention as well as the potential change required for

multimodal affordances compares with considering the road signs directing traffic into

the roundabout.

Down the road from this crossroads, students need the ability to compose in

multiple modes. As Faigley and others point out,  students entering work environments in

the twenty-first century will interpret, produce, and evaluate multimodal communication

(Faigley, "Challenge" 187; Hawisher and Selfe, "Literate Lives" 1-2; Ball and Moeller,

"Reinventing"). Furthermore, most college students already engage in multimodal

communications daily (Ball and Moeller, "Reinventing"). In expanding composition

studies to include multimodal composing, teachers can help students make rhetorical

choices to strengthen and improve their ability to communicate.  Besides preparing

students for the workplace, including multimodal composition likewise has the potential

to expand composition's prestige in academia and with stakeholders outside academia

(Moran, "Powerful Medicine" 64).

In contrast, multimodal composition when poorly implemented can distract from

important writing concepts, becoming mere embellishments or "bells and whistles" rather

than a meaningful rhetorical exercise (Rodrigues qtd. in Inman 196; Hesse 605). For that

reason, composition instructors must thoughtfully implement research-based best

practices regarding multimodal communication. My research provides the computers and

composition community with suggestions evaluating the use of multimodal assignments

in the composition classroom.

To effectively implement multimodal composing into the composition classroom,

instructors must balance convention and change. Composition studies has a long and rich

history from which there is much to be learned. When adopting multimodality into their

classrooms, composition instructors need not and should not abandon their past

pedogological practices (Yancey, "The Pleasures" 107; Selfe and Takayoshi 5). It is

instructors, and not technology, that must determine what is taught and how it is taught

(Takayoshi and Huot 5; C. Selfe qtd. in Inman 202). When professors use that agency to

carefully decide which learning objectives are best met with multimodal assignments,

multimodal composing gains direction and relevance.

Conventional rhetorical theory is an excellent place to begin when designing

multimodal assignments; however, it is paramount that this theory serves as a beginning

and not an end. Multimodal composition is an expansion on traditional composition. As

an expansion, instructors must teach students about the individual affordances of each

communication mode (Ball and Moeller, "Reinventing"; Hess 30; Fleischer, Selfe, and

Wright 13-14) in contrast with less informed practice which does not address the

affordance of multimodal composition mediums,  Thus, successful multimodal

compositions explore complexities of relationships between modes of communication

(Yancey, "Looking" 95). Because the current educational system emphasizes alphabetic

text as the primary means of composing, most students have not received explicit

instructions on multimodal affordances. For this reason, scaffolding such as modeling and

formative assessment are crucial for helping students compose in different

communication modes (Wickliff and Yancey 179; Fleischer, Selfe, and Wright 18).

Formative assessment is crucial for establishing student expectations, especially

for communication modes with which they may be less familiar (Herrington and Moran 252; Borton and Huot 101). In creating assessments, composition instructors should once again begin with conventional rhetorically based assessment principles. Formative and summative assessments ought to help students better gauge their understanding of the principles being taught. If teachers want students to actively apply rhetorical principles to multimodal compositions, the assessment of such compositions must incorporate the same rhetorical principles.

Simultaneously, it is also important that composition instructors expand their assessment to acknowledge multimodal differences. If students are to explore the complexities of multimodality, it is important that multimodal affordances are addressed in formative assessments. In addressing multimodal affordances, composition instructors do not have to separate conventional criteria from multimodal criteria. Because multimodal design is not separate from content (Ball, "Designerly" 394), multimodal assessment will aid students to see how a mode's individual affordances help it fulfill its rhetorical purpose.

Since multimodal assessment and composing are foreign not only to students but more often to professors, it is helpful for composition instructors to become familiar with examples such as those in *Kairos* and *Computers and Composition* Online. More importantly, instructors should then try multimodal composition themselves (Ball, "Show" 404; Selfe, "Response"; Borton and Huot 103; Remley).

While this study provides readers with sound ideas on how to begin to implement multimodal composition, it does not address all of the complexities of best practices for

successful multimodal composition instruction. Further research and professional development are needed to help instructors improve multimodal instruction in order for it to reach its full potential. I call for more research in the following areas:

- How are other instructors implementing multimodality into their classrooms? What successes and failures resulted from their multimodal assignments? What contributed to either the success or failure of these assignments?

- How do multimodal instructional practices differ in a traditional classroom compared with an online or blended classroom?

- Currently, there is a separation between alphabetic text and multimodal text. Is such a separation needed? Or should alphabetic texts come to be seen as a subset of multimodality? What implication would such a shift in thought have on composition studies?

- What resources are available to instructors for learning multimodal technologies?

- How will access and the technology/wealth gap affect multimodal practices? How can we plan now to reduce or address the gap?

In specifying these questions, I call for responses in the form of multimodal texts and alphabetic articles. An increased number of scholarly multimodal articles would help instructors gain a deeper, personal appreciation for the complexities of multimodal composing. Such articles, however, currently appeal more to those already in the computers and composition field. To reach those unfamiliar with the literature from the

computers and composition field, it is also important for scholars to share their work on multimodality in traditional 4 Cs print journals.

Despite unforeseen detours on the road of multimodality, multimodal composition is increasing in its importance and will continue to do so into the twenty-first century. Recognizing that multimodal composition is still relatively new and developing, as composition instructors, we are in the unique position to carefully influence how it will develop in the years to come. As we do so, let us examine where we've came from in order to better consider where we have the potential to go.

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