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INQUIRY, COLLABORATION, AND REFLECTION IN THE STUDENT (TEXT)-CENTERED MULTIMODAL WRITING COURSE

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To teach with student texts is to acknowledge that students are savvy and experienced enough to collaboratively shape and enact productive classrooms. It seems only natural that these same students recognize what scholars in our field have been arguing for more than a decade: that "what counts as a text and what constitutes reading and writing are changing" (Hull and Nelson 2005, 224). If we're going to ask our students to work closely with their classmates' texts, it is important to remain sensitive to their perceptions about what count as texts.

Students are often skeptical about genres and modes of composing with which they are unfamiliar or that they suspect are out of date. This is not to say that our traditional prose-centric genres and typographic modes of composing are becoming obsolete. Rather, we argue, along with the New London Group, that "literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (1996, 61). These new texts include Facebook pages, streaming videos on YouTube and CNN, and media-rich blog and wiki entries. What's important about these emerging genres is not just that they are multimodal (employing sound, image, typography, video, etc.). Students have long encountered such complexities in popular media. Instead, students are increasingly taking advantage of emerging technologies to produce texts employing strategies with which they

are familiar. Kathleen Blake Yancey characterizes this phenomenon as a "tectonic change" in the ways students are encountering, producing, and distributing texts (2004, 298). In other words, students are taking a more active role in defining which texts count.

In this chapter, we offer snapshots of work with student texts at three different stages of a multimodal composition course. Each moment, derived from a different instructor's interpretation of the same basic course design, reveals the collaborative, rhetorical, and reflective potential of placing student work at the center of the multimodal classroom. Our goal for the course was to encourage students to produce nontraditional (multimodal) as well as traditional (print-based) texts, thereby extending their literacy practices into varying modes of communication. We hope to show how nontraditional, multimodal student texts can function at the heart of a composition class, how these texts diverge and converge with traditional student work, and the extent to which these design strategies extend student engagement beyond the walls of the classroom.

To manage the diverse goals of this course, we built our pedagogy around strategies suggested by David Jolliffe in his 1998 textbook *Inquiry and Genre: Writing to Learn in College*. Jolliffe's inquiry-based approach emphasizes traditional forms of academic work—exploratory essays, research reports, and so forth—as well as less traditional, more public iterations of that work. We see the slow process of learning through questioning, responding, writing, and rewriting as the glue that binds together the disparate reading and writing strategies we organized for the class. Students engaged difficult theoretical readings about multimodal design (Hull and Nelson 2005; Sirc 2004; Yancey 2004) as well as multimodal texts spanning genres and communities of interest (including Web pages, Cornell boxes, and episodes of *This American Life*). The struggle to critically comprehend new discursive strategies and to complicate more familiar ones gave all of us the opportunity to challenge our own preconceived ideas about what constitutes classroom work and what effect this work could have on an audience.

Assignments for the course consisted of weekly reflections and an inquiry-based portfolio, which culminated in a final multimodal text. The weekly writing assignments were designed to focus on how individuals encounter, read, and produce texts composed using a variety of modes, including print, image, sound, and space. The portfolio emphasized more traditional writing subjects like researching and drafting,

but concluded with a multimodal assignment meant to bring the two clusters of classroom discussion together. At several stages of portfolio development, using what Jolliffe calls the "Inquiry Contract" (1998), students were required to revise, discuss, and reevaluate this work. In our classrooms, this strategy lent itself to the highly communal nature of multimodal design. Student texts, or "inside" texts, were approached in the same manner as "outside" or published texts. Students were asked to react to the work of their peers as they would the chapters in a composition reader, Web pages on the Internet, or short movies on YouTube. This strategy emphasizes not only the value of student texts, but also how their own readings of text are important to how their peers choose to revise future drafts.

As with more traditional print essays, multimodal design challenges students to produce final texts that stand on their own as readers experience them; however, multimodal *drafts* often evolve in much more unpredictable and responsive directions. Students might explore the opportunities available in one mode of composition, only to discover that another mode might offer richer opportunities. These sorts of changes sometimes result from an individual student reckoning with their own texts, but more often students engage one another in ongoing discussions throughout the process. In order to facilitate this sort of collaboration, we formalize this aspect of the process as we ask students to present their work in progress, both sharing discoveries about their own processes, as well as eliciting feedback from their peers.

Ultimately, our courses required students to use multiple design strategies in semester-long investigations of one area of interest. The classroom became a space where students explored their subjects together, layering their knowledge through assignments designed to expand their critical and modal resources. Working collaboratively, they heightened their sense of audience as different modal opportunities offered a dialogue between designer and reader, and they complicated their awareness of the dynamic conversations at work in any given subject area.

NETWORKED COLLABORATION

Julia's multimodal writing section resisted traditional hierarchies of skill separating teachers and students by cultivating a cooperative, student-centered space. In terms of multimodal composition, Julia and the students in her class were all experts and novices in overlapping ways. As such, bringing students' "inside" texts into the classroom emphasized

the fact that everyone could learn something from the person sitting next to them. Also contributing to student-centered instruction was the location of class meetings, as each week the class met once in a traditional classroom and once in a Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) classroom. Working with computers transformed the classroom into a gallery space where traditional and multimodal compositions could be easily shared. Each computer station became a place for students to exhibit their evolving work; a central screen was useful for visually amplifying specific texts. Because of their networking capabilities, the computers encouraged student contact, reciprocity, cooperation, active learning, and feedback—important tenets of collaboration not always achieved when students peer review paper texts.

Moving toward the completion of their working documents, the class spent a lot of time developing individual student texts within the sequence of assignments. A particularly useful revision exercise, dependent upon the CAI classroom, was the distribution of digital student documents for community revision. Rather than just making suggestions verbally or through marginal notes, computer screens enabled students to become invested in the work of their peers because they could see their role in the revision of an actual working document. Julia designed a process for motivating this movement from individual to group revision by first posting student texts to a discussion board and then assigning individuals particular sections of a peer's text to read. In class, students opened these documents on personal computers and made suggestions or changes to the text (tracking changes via MS Word). Next, all students working on a particular section of the document formed into groups in order to work together with the original draft of the document, negotiating suggestions from each member of the group. At the end of this stage, each group posted their revisions to the same discussion board as the original draft. Finally, everyone came together to discuss their strategies and suggestions with the class. Each group took a turn using the central computer, which was projected onto a central screen, moving through revision suggestions and explaining their reasoning. Upon completion of this mini-presentation, the class discussed the group's suggestions, accepting or rejecting what was presented.

This revision exercise takes advantage of the networked classroom by allowing students to view revisions instantly, often leading to animated discussions. Students appeared more enthusiastic because they could *see* their role in the writing processes of their peers. While this

process became a community activity, final choices were—of course—made by the individual student author. Being able not only to see, but also to hear through discussion, how revisions altered the meaning and function of the text was beneficial for students developing their work. Moreover, the ability to assess immediately the suggestions of others, using computers to observe how revisions affect a text's purpose, made revision a dynamic and tangible process.

MULTIPLE EXPERTS AND DESIGN SOLUTIONS

Ryan's version of the course was designed to get students working together and drawing on each other's various sets of expertise. The culminating assignment for the course was structured as a three-stage process. For the first stage, each student wrote a Document Proposal describing a possible multimodal text he or she wanted to produce. Students met in small groups to offer suggestions and explanations of their projects. The second stage of the process involved the production of a multimodal working draft of that text, as well as a classroom presentation explaining it. Here, too, students offered each other substantial feedback and ideas for revision. It was during the third stage that students responded to those revisions in producing final versions of their multimodal texts. In order to provide a specific, material sense of how these assignments were enacted, we discuss our impressions of one student's experience in the course.

Duane had been a long-time fan of hip-hop radio stations on the internet. He loved the music, and the DJs' commentary between songs often revealed meaningful connections for him. Ongoing class discussions investigated ways different texts operate in various discourse communities. Duane recognized that DJs helped construct and identify different conversations within the hip-hop community. As the students researched and talked about their chosen communities, they helped each other identify specific topic areas and genre conventions. Within the context of the course goals, Duane quickly recognized parallels between the rhetorical practices of hip-hop culture and the rhetorical practices of more traditionally academic discourses.

In their Document Proposals, students had described their chosen discourse community, an ongoing discussion within it, a genre of multimodal text operating in that community, and a research question they planned to pursue. Although Duane was a bit vague about his chosen discourse community, he proposed a talk radio show looking at public

discussions about interracial dating. At his first peer-review session, he played a few potential songs for his workshop group and listed potential questions. As he had hoped, his group offered suggestions about his proposal and their own alternatives. They drew heavily on their own experiences listening to talk radio and their own music catalogs. What Duane hadn't expected, though, was that his group also offered some technical strategies for producing his show. He had been at a loss as to how he might record the phone calls he was planning. He was also relatively unfamiliar with audio-editing software and with ways of capturing and preparing files for production. In this way, Duane used his proposal to facilitate collaboration with his peer-review group towards the presentation of his final multimodal text. For the next two weeks, the project's second stage, Duane continued to experiment and seek feedback about capturing audio, directing actors, and editing sound files.

As Duane played his text for the second workshop session, this time in front of the whole class, it was hard not to recognize his investment in his project. The music faded in and he introduced his show (complete with fictional station call letters) in the voice of a seasoned professional. After a brief introduction, he proceeded to interview several "callers." However, while technically polished and generically representative, the shortcomings of Duane's text quickly emerged. He asked each of his guests the same simple question without follow-up or clarification. As the unrehearsed responses piled up, it was clear that what Duane had produced was an audio survey offering little insight into the questions he had hoped to pursue.

At this point in the term, students had only a week to make any final adjustments to their texts, and Ryan had challenged them to revise their projects in the third and final stage of the production process. During the feedback session following Duane's presentation, his classmates suggested a wider variety of callers and shorter musical transitions. Ryan asked Duane how, with his radio show, he might incorporate or respond to some of the texts he had researched for the project. The ensuing discussion was fruitful for both Duane and his classmates. He formulated possibilities for more engaging questions. He also wanted to frame a discussion about his topic to open the show, so that his callers could place themselves within it.

But revision is always a demanding process, and working with multimodal texts only exacerbates those challenges. With so little time left in the term, Duane wasn't able to interview new subjects, re-edit the overall

document, and export it again. Instead, he re-recorded his concluding remarks, quickly noting the difficulty of public discussion on his topic. He did, however, still manage to sign off with those slick station call letters and his smooth radio voice.

REFLECTING (ON) MULTIMODALITY

> The final project, the multimodal project, was also very difficult to complete . . . eventually I chose to make a movie/documentary about women and graffiti. It was hard to make my point clear and convey the right things. I knew what I wanted to say, but not how I wanted to say them. I knew what I wanted people to think, but not how to make them think that way. Another problem, was making sure my movie was not too long and that I only included essential information, I did not want to be boring, but I felt I should give a lot of information because not many people know about the women in graffiti . . . I am trying to make people more aware, so I want to include all this information, but I do not want them to be uninterested in all that I have to say, so I include less information. (Student author's reflection on *Women in Graffiti*)

Framing a multimodal composition course around published and student work encourages students to exercise critical/composition skills on a more familiar level. Instead of imagining a product their instructor might desire, students assume a social use from communication as well as material value from a culturally favored discourse. *Women in Graffiti*—a student documentary that uses still images, audio narration, and video to draw attention to the underrecognized role women play in the graffiti subculture—exemplifies these potential benefits. Despite its technical flaws—poorly mixed audio, awkward gaps in the accompanying voiceover—it resonates as an MTV-esque documentary geared to an audience that is specifically marked in terms of age, interest, and, arguably, politics.

Near the end of the semester, students in Scott's class took turns presenting working drafts of their multimodal documents and leading response discussions. While he often introduced student texts anonymously in order to give individuals the opportunity to opt out of the public eye, the nature of the course and the community-oriented development of the Inquiry Contract required students to stand (literally) by their work. Work done prior to actualizing the project made this public exhibition easier as peers were already familiar with each author's topic and approach. Experiencing the text in the classroom together, as we

had experienced "professional" texts throughout the semester, at once lent validation to the work as something worth sharing, and mimicked the public manner in which multimodal texts are often experienced—on television, in advertisements, and on the Internet.

The presentations occupied several weeks (five fifty-minute classes). Five student texts were discussed per session. Each student was thus allotted five minutes for an introduction and presentation (video or audio productions were restricted to five minutes by the assignment prompt), with at least five minutes for discussion to follow. Every effort was made to prepare the necessary technology in advance, but this is an important caveat to introducing student texts into the MM classroom: technology is inconsistent, or rather, human use of technology is inconsistent.

Student authors led discussion by outlining the goals of their project, an "ideal" audience, and their rationale for selecting specific modes. After presentations, peers responded as this "ideal" audience, though they could discuss anything they found compelling, problematic, and so on. The author of *Women in Graffiti*, a quiet student with a lot of traditional writing ability, suggested that it would not be difficult to imagine her ideal audience: most people, including those in the graffiti subculture, don't value the participation of women artists. The class was expected to draw on preconceived notions about graffiti, and hip-hop culture more generally, being a "man's world." In fact, the original cut of the documentary opens with James Brown singing "It's a Man's World." The author said little about the modes she had selected for her video, but in discussion she explained that she wanted to lend a sort of credibility to women's work in graffiti. As such, her choices of very traditional documentary style make sense. Images cut together with video explained by a voice-over narrator are documentary commonplace, something even only casually interested viewers would expect to see.

The ensuing discussion—evident in the reflection cited above—focused on accessibility and value. The author is at once aware of the repercussions for doing a project like this "wrong," expressed by her fears of coming across as unclear or "boring." She wrestles with how her audience receives the text because she experienced her audience receiving it. For example, peers questioned the lack of voice given to women; no interviews were conducted or appropriated for the piece. One respondent went so far as to suggest that James Brown has the most prominent speaking role, despite the intended irony of his inclusion. As

a result, the song was removed, a change the author admits undermined the character of the project.

This intersection of content and materiality brought about an interesting discussion—from the students themselves—regarding choices about what to include and how to integrate it into the larger project. What we would highlight as unique about this scenario is the immediate accessibility of both the creative and technical discourses of multimodal composition. Placing the student texts at the center of the course, then, validates their work as something familiar and exciting, something "marketable" in the cultural capital of the day.

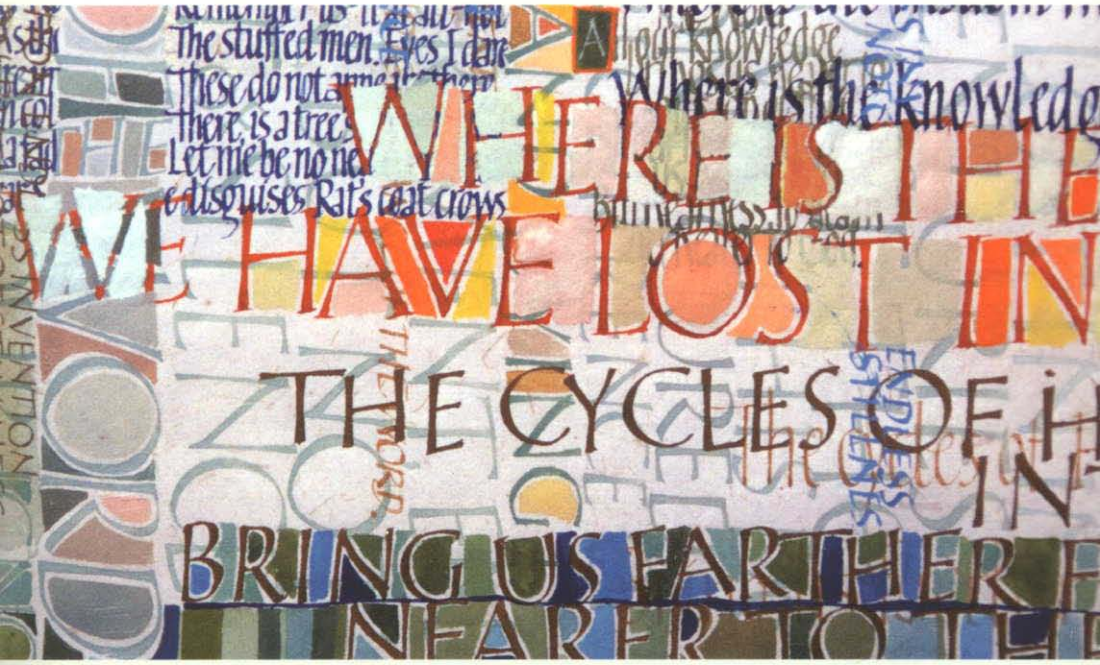
CHALLENGES IN THE MULTIMODAL CLASSROOM

Like any strategy, placing student texts at the center of multimodal writing comes with unique uses and limitations. For students, multimodal texts are often more dynamic and approachable than traditional texts and therefore garner increased attention and engagement. Further, when resources are available, situating students in a computer-equipped classroom encourages a level of community difficult to attain with more "conventional" group or peer work as students are able to interact physically and electronically, working on mediums that many of them are quite familiar with. We do, however, feel that a word of caution is necessary here. While we believe these practices are becoming increasingly popular, they are still inconsistent and uneven. To assume that all of our students engage in these practices is to assume easy access to the required technologies. It further assumes that all of our students operate in a culture that values these practices enough for them to dedicate significant social energy and time. In other words, instructors need to be sensitive to students who don't embrace these practices with the same fervor as others. While teaching with multimodal student texts often fosters collaborative writing environments, it also has the potential to intensify student differences. It is important that assignments within these contexts are flexible enough to allow for low-tech modes, such as collage or live performance, as well as digital technologies.

Other issues arise as well. Students publicly encounter boundaries brought on by their attempts to compose in nontraditional forms; student-led discussions might compel changes that are problematic; material limitations imposed by course length or design may inhibit student work. We feel, however, that these issues can be productive sites of conflict. A major benefit of using student work in a multimodal course is

in reducing the likelihood that surface dominates substance. Problems of materiality and the choices required to realize a vision are the very difficulties inherent in any composition practice. For instance, talking about revising audio tracks can be an opportunity to talk about revision in multiple discursive modes. Our students were compelled by social context and productive discussion to move beyond an easy appreciation for multimodal forms to the hard task of designing text, engaging critical discussion, and reflecting for productive revision. Ultimately, multimodal texts complicate ideas about what "text" and writing processes should look like in the university. Situating them at the center of a composition course offers teachers the challenge of publicly engaging student work in modes and mediums that many of us were perhaps not trained to value.

TEACHING
with Student Texts



Essays Toward an Informed Practice

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Teaching with Student Texts

Essays Toward an Informed Practice

Harris, Miles, and Paine argue that the practice of teaching with student texts speaks to a defining concern of the discipline: engaging students in meaningful reflection on—and effective revision of—their own work. Contributors here address a dozen different approaches to turning the texts that students themselves create into the material focus of a writing course.

At its center, then, the volume is a pedagogical one, with chapters rooted in the concerns and the scene of the writing classroom. The authors argue that putting student texts on the seminar table is an effective way to make clear the moves and principles of academic writing, and they gather a set of chapters here that describe approaches to doing this.

More fundamentally, the collection makes evident an ideology that sees pedagogy not as technique, but as informed practice grounded in the central and dynamic concerns of its discipline.

Teaching with Student Texts is a rich, useful, and provocative book.
—Linda Adler-Kassner, University of California, Santa Barbara, author of *The Activist WPA*, winner of the 2010 CWPA Best Book Award

The editors know that a quiet revolution is set in motion when the focus of instruction shifts from professional writing to student writing.
—Richard E. Miller, Rutgers University, author of *Writing at the End of the World*

This thoughtful attention to teaching with student texts is the book's platform, and, to my mind, its inquiries set a new standard of informed practice.
—John Trimbur, Emerson College, author of *The Call to Write*

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