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The History of Multimodal Composition, Its Implementation, and Challenges

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Abstract:

Multimodal composition, bundled with alphabetic literacy, has come a long way. However, history has it that multimodality has always been marginalized by the dominant alphabetic writing. Today, writing courses are tailored to address the communication needs of the students in a world increasingly dominated by non-standard media. This takes into account, as stated by The New London Group, much broader view of literacy than depicted by traditional language-based approaches, entailing increasing cultural and linguistic diversity across the world. One of the challenges of multimodal compositions is our assessment criteria that still evaluates students on the basis of what we assume they know in place of what they actually know. Similarly, the default perception nursed by the instructors that techno-savvy students are good evaluators of information from various sources should be shunned. The writing instructors, in addition to developing flexible, multimodal strategies for inventing and revising alphabetic writing, should also be adept both at teaching and evaluating multimodal compositions. It would not be fair to treat multimodality as something separate from alphabetic compositions, but rather as a practice that further stretches the scope of such texts. In all these, the academic institutions must offer a full support.

Keywords: multimodality, alphabetic texts, implementation, challenges.

Introduction

The discourse on multimodal composition seems to have gained a momentum of late in academia. However, it would be flawed to conceive of multimodality only as a recent phenomenon. Jason Palmeri, an eminent scholar in the field of multimodal composition, in the first part of his investigation in *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing*, states “how composing texts, even alphabetic texts, has always been multimodal.” That acknowledged, whether it is the oral rhetorical tradition dating as long back as the Greco Roman times or the

practice of stone carvings during the Mayan civilization, multimodal composing has come a long way. However, what cannot be denied is literacy was held hostage to the province of alphabetic texts; alphabetic texts clearly enjoyed preferential treatment over other modes of communication. For example, European conquerors were bent on replacing the Amerindian writings that manifested in graphic signs with alphabetic texts. Today, despite the alphabetic texts still enjoying a lion's share of prominence in the academia, the non-standard media, or often the apt "remix" of the alphabetic texts and the new media –also "remix" as a metaphor used by Palmeri and Banks- do occupy an important position in the writing curriculum. The First-Year Writing Course at UTEP, for example, specifically consists of a high percentage of multimodal assignments such as brochures, infographics and public service announcement (PSA).

In this paper, I will discuss the concept of multimodality and multiliteracy, basically leaning on scholars such as Palmeri, Selber and the New London Group, and posit a few instances of how multimodal compositions prevailed in the past. I will then discuss how they are situated in the present context. I will also talk about how different scholars speak to multimodality, including Suresh Canagarajah, whose views make me ponder whether translanguaging is inherently multimodal. I will be closing the paper by discussing some challenges that prevent multimodal composition practice from being effectively realized in the academia and what the academia should consider to embrace multimodal composition in today's classrooms.

Multimodality/Multiliteracy

To have a basic understanding of the concept of multimodality in the current context, it may be relevant to quote Jenifer Roswell. Roswell says that in a world dominated by digital media, meaning making manifests in more than one mode, and these modes could be sounds, images and hypertexts. She in particular advances eight such modes: words, images, sounds, movement, animation, hypertext, design and modal learning. Next, Eleni Katsarou, and Tsafos Vassilis cite Kress & Van Leeuwen who argue that "the key to multimodal perspectives in literacy is the basic assumption that meanings are made (distributed, interpreted and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one" (48). Thus, breaking the syndicate of alphabetic texts, they stress that articulation of meaning is not the sole province of language, and other semiotics may as well serve that purpose. They then

go on to establish a connection between multimodality and multiliteracy: “multimodality and multiliteracies correlate to recommend an expanded idea of text and indeed of the way by which the processes of reading, writing, speaking and listening are conceptualized; these are revisited as social practices” (49). Basically, they see multimodality theory growing out of multiliteracy framework.

Simply put, multimodal composition refers to the “writing” that goes beyond alphabetic texts. The New London Group show connections between the changing social environment which are subject to both students and teachers and propose a new approach to literacy pedagogy that they term “multiliteracies.” The writers contend that a wide array of communications channels coupled with increasing cultural and linguistic diversity across the world today demand a much broader view of literacy than depicted by traditional language-based approaches. This broader view of literacy pedagogy incorporates the importance of multimodal approaches to reading and production of the texts. They posit: “Local diversity and global connectedness mean not only that there can be no standard; they also mean that the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class based/ dialects; variations in register that occur according to social context...” (69). The issues of negotiation and variations in register clearly point towards texts that are no longer confined to conventional textual writings but show up in the form of different non-standard media such as billboard, documentaries and flyers.

Stuart Selber also talks about multiliteracies but he is more invested in talking about computer technology in relation to writing and communication. He engages with questions such as what a computer literate student should be able to do, what is required of literacy teachers to educate such a student, and how a functional computer literacy fits within the values of teaching writing and communication as a profession. He presses for the need to revisit functional literacy such that it speaks to teachers of writing and communication and proposes a framework for computer literacy instruction that fuses functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies in the interest of social action and change. His concept of functional literacy takes students as the users of technology who effectively employ it to perform their tasks but this lacks textured insights and critical perspective. Critical literacy is associated with questioning of the computer, as the computer is not neutral but political, and nurses informed critique. Finally, rhetorical literacy, combining functional and rhetorical abilities, takes the computer as a hyper textual media and helps students become the reflective producers of technology. Selber uses the metaphors of

“tool”, “cultural artifact” and “hypertexts” to talk about functional, critical and rhetorical frameworks respectively. I can relate this text to the course I am teaching, RWS 1301, as the major assignments in the course comprise Visual Argument, E-Portfolio, Discourse Community Map, Brochure, Infographic and PSA. I have, in the course of guiding my students through these projects, helped them apply functional, critical and rhetorical literacies developed by Selber. These multimodal projects have changed my students from mere consumers to active producers of knowledge. Now, in addition to acquainting themselves with the working knowledge of the computer and treating it as mere tool to get the job done, they have begun to understand that it is a cultural artifact that needs to be put to scrutiny, for example, with regards to the templates and the interface. Eventually, they become the producers of technology. For example, now, not only do they learn the functional aspects of making an E-Portfolio, but actually create one, and in so doing critically examine socio-cultural dimensions of the tools before making their rhetorical choices. The critical and rhetorical frameworks of Selber speak to Haas who argues that “technology is both integral to culture and always already cultural. Just as the rhetoric we compose can never be objective, neither can technologies we design. Technologies are not neutral or objective-nor are the ways that we use them” (288). In this light, the students should be able to critically examine the ideologies with which such tools may be tacitly or overtly colored and adopt designs or modify them to suit their rhetorical objective, and instructors’ role would be a key one in the process in terms of how we train our students to be aware of ideological aspects of technology.

Jason Palmeri’s *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* is also opposed to the view that the composition procedure solely stands on alphabetic writing. Revisiting many classic texts of composition theory, from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, Palmeri closely examines how the practitioners of composition in the past responded to the “new media.” He shows how long before the sharp increase in the use and popularity of personal computers and the graphic web, compositionists used analog multimedia technologies in the teaching of composition. Palmeri posits how these early scholars were aware of many of our current interests in composing with audio-visual texts. By elaborating on the concept of the fusion, with the use of “remix” metaphor, Palmeri presents concrete pedagogical suggestions on how writing teachers can implement digital activities, assignments, and curricula that students today cannot do without.

He talks about multimodal approaches used in the past such as moving images and sounds, but now quite forgotten, and shows how compositionists today can productively remix these past pedagogies to cope with the complexities and potentials of the contemporary digital landscape. Dealing with multimodal features of the recent composition history, Palmeri's contribution is crucial in talking about the importance of the future of writing instruction in an era dictated by digital technology. Palmeri has been able to show clearly how multimodality has been employed to "synthesize expressivist, cognitive, and social-epistemic approaches." Multimodality thus establishes connections between different competencies connected to knowledge and society.

Ashok Bhusal, in "Addressing FYC Instructors Lack of Technological Expertise in Implementing Multimodal Assignments," explains the concept of multimodality from a nonwestern perspective, examining international instructors' experience teaching multimodal assignments in first-year composition. He states, international teachers "bring cultural capital, knowledge and teaching skills acquired both inside and outside the United States, to the classroom. However, when they lack technological expertise, they are likely to have difficulty leading a class to its full potential. On the other hand, when they have a knowledge of computers and new technologies, they can more productively use their cultural capital and implement multimodal texts" (180). His point is that teacher training and technological literacy play an important role in effectively employing multimodal projects in a multilingual classroom.

The next advocacy of multimodality can also be witnessed in *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Adam Banks, through the employment of remixes coupled with a DJ metaphor, is able to exhibit the instrumentality of technology in helping to connect cross cultural and generational discourses along with connecting composition writing with roots and shared identity. Banks takes the remix "to be the creation of a new version of a song or a text, a remake undertaken to fit a different context, audience or purpose, where the 're' in the mix might involve rearranging the elements, changing the beat..." (89). Talking about the methodological implications of remix in composition, he asserts that "remix can lead to a reshaping of a graduate curricula in order to make them more relevant to a constantly changing writing and technology landscape" (89). The changed writing and technology landscape merits the recognition of the multiliteracy practices of the minorities from across times and cultures. For Banks, who primarily talks about how African Americans have historically informed

technologies and how they continue to do so in multi-modal and multi-disciplinary ways, the DJ “tells the stories, carries the history, interprets the news, mediates the disputes, and helps shape the community’s collective identity” (25.)

Thus, Banks clearly navigates the communication avenues beyond linguistic alphabetic signs and specifically presses for the need of oral texts to acknowledge the role of multiliteracies in blending discourses across cultures. He stresses not just the production of multimodal texts but also acknowledges that the production of such texts will continue to inform marginalized rhetorics. Therefore, as Ashok Bhusal says, it is important to “complete a deeper study of minorities and bring their stories, their voices, into academic scholarship” (Bhusal 88). We, as students of rhetoric, need to continue to look for minority writers who have discussed multimodality from non-western frameworks and who “have been largely marginalized or ignored and reclaim their contributions in the twenty-first century” (Bhusal 56).

In this regard, it would be relevant to pull into conversation D.D. Sellnow who too, like Banks, is invested in establishing a link between musical composition and persuasive communication. Although the text primarily deals with the idea of persuading audience to hegemonic masculinity through the song “He thinks he’ll keep her”, and how music can function as an authentic voice for women as a group on the margin, it is a good example of multimodal communicative practice. Sellnow says, “It follows that one means by which to develop this voice and to achieve legitimacy may be too employ modes of communication other than the conventional discursive language systems, which tends to perpetuate the hegemonic worldview held by dominant culture” (67). Thus, it has been acknowledged by scholars across genres that which mode of communication is to be used is determined by the rhetorical situation, and that modes of communication beyond conventional discursive language nurture the potential to challenge the dominant values.

Suresh Canagarajah in “Negotiating Translingual Literacy: An Enactment” also sees the inherent presence of multimodality in translingualism. He argues that an understanding of writing as translingual requires a shift to a different orientation to literacy—i.e., from autonomous and situated to negotiated. He asserts that “such an orientation treats the text as co-constructed in time and space—with parity for readers and writers in shaping the meaning and form—and thus performed rather than pre-constructed, making the multimodal and multisensory dimensions of the text fully functional” (40). The article elaborates on the multimodal features

employed by students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and that it is the performative negotiation between the interlocutors at certain spatiotemporal sites that meaning making is accomplished. Next, talking about non-native students, Canagarajah states how “they are able to transition so well because they bring strategies of engaging with multilingual and multimodal literacies from social media sites and other contact zones” (431).

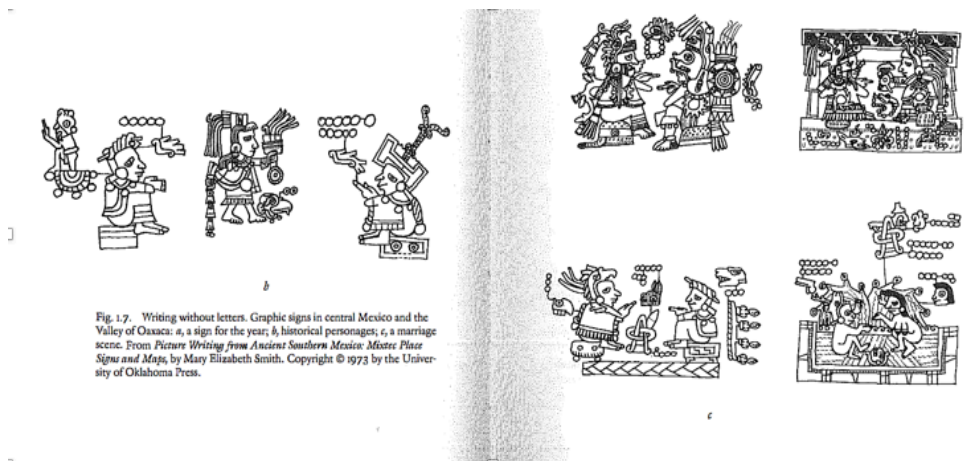
Multimodality, speaking from the translingual perspective, is a challenge to autonomous orientation to literacy that advocates for the conformation to the dominant language conventions.

A Peek at the History of Multimodal Composition

Ekaterina V Haskins, referring to the Greco Roman times, argues that “the consequences of the literate revolution for reflection about language must be reconsidered in the light of the surprising survival of the “oral” tradition within the literary practices of philosophers and rhetoricians” (18). This comes, as per the writer, against the backdrop when the switch from orality to literacy, then referred to as writing, which has that “in the story of rhetoric’s origins and blossoming, the transition from oral modes of communication to writing is assigned the leading part” (158). Although this shift to “writing” even seems to downplay the clout of oral tradition, given the historical trajectory of rhetoric blended with various aural and visual communication modes, one cannot turn a blind eye to the intrinsic presence of multimodality in communication irrespective of time and place.

Next, in *The Darker Sides of the Renaissance*, Walter D Mingolo establishes a link between alphabetic writing and exercise of power in regards to the colonial project. He exhibits the power of the alphabetic texts in cementing colonial status quo, and posits associations between writing and political clout. His book illustrates the disadvantaged position of the native Americans owing to the difference that prevailed between the language they used and that of the alphabetic texts which the European invaders imposed on them, rendering their non-alphabetic texts invalid. However, what I intend to show here is how multimodal writings employed by cultures and societies across spatio-temporal locations were in no way inferior to alphabetic compositions. For example, on pages 60 and 61 (as shown in the images below), there are examples of communications that take place using graphic signs: a sign for the year, historic personages, and a marriage ceremony.

Figure 1. Graphic signs used in Central Mexico and the Valley of Oaxaca in the 16th Century.



Adapted from Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*.

The transmission of messages through the pictorial means appears no less effective than the messages conveyed strictly by autonomous texts. Rather, they seem to be using the rhetorical appeals such as ethos, logos and pathos more effectively. This elaborates on how indigenous writings did not necessarily comprise letters as such- as was the case in central Mexico and the valley of Oaxaca before the colonization project-and often artistic images were used in conveying messages. Similarly, writings would take place beyond books, for example in ancient Egypt, graphic inscriptions were carved on stones. An excerpt from the book goes:

Landa around 1566 gave a description (instead of a definition) of the materiality of Maya "books." It is worthwhile when reading it to keep in mind Venegas's definition: They wrote their books on a long sheet doubled in folds, which was then enclosed between two boards finely ornamented; the writing was on one side and the other according to the folds. *The paper they made from the roots of a tree, and gave it a white finish excellent for writing upon.* Some of the principal lords were learned in these sciences, from interests, and for the greater esteem they enjoyed thereby; yet, they did not make use of them in public. (73)

This exemplifies the rich practice of multimodality long back in the Mayan times. Similarly, Jay Dolmage in "Métis, Mestiza, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies Across Rhetorical Traditions," shows how through the meshing of the sketches and paintings with the alphabetic text, multimodal approaches have been used to attain competence in communication for a very long period of time.

Multimodal Composition in Today's Academic Settings and Challenges

Having discussed the concept of multimodality, and its prominence of multimodality across different historical timelines, it may now be relevant to see how multimodality plays out in the academia today and the challenges behind its effective implementation. Rachel Karchmer-Klein, Rachel, and Shinas Harlow Valerie indicate that specifically, teachers must be aware of emerging technologies, recognize the complexities of new literacies, realize tech-savvy students may not be skilled readers and writers of web-based texts, and develop assessments to evaluate 21st century skills. They state that “along with technology adoption comes the critical responsibility of preparing students to use the tools effectively to support their learning” (288). They thus emphasize the need to focus on new literacy technology that entails cognitive processing skills indispensable for communication that fits with the needs of the present contexts. We are today dealing with students that we label as digital natives; these are the ones, starting with people born in the 1980's, and assumed to have major access to information communication technologies. This then could as well point to the danger of perceptions that instructors, and by proxy, the institutions may nurse towards their “techno-savvy” students: if students possess basic computer knowledge, they are able to locate and evaluate the content from various websites on their own. However, Selber asserts that “students who are not adequately exposed to all three literacy categories, functional, critical and rhetorical, will find it difficult to participate fully and meaningfully in technological activities” (24). Clearly, this conclusion makes sense: how can students be effective users of technology if they are not also effective questioners of technology as critical approach calls for the same? So, this default assumption that instructors hold of their students may come as an impediment in helping students make better use of the technologies that they can't do without in today's world. Therefore, our assessment criteria should be centered on evaluating what students actually know as opposed to what we assume they know.

Next, easy access to technology does not guarantee that students use it and possess the expertise to comprehend it. Klein, Rachel, and Shinas Harlow Valerie further contend that “although teachers may worry that new literacies may supplant traditional text based literacies in the 21-st century classroom, they must set aside those concerns and replace them with the knowledge that, when taught well, new literacies can support and extend student's abilities to read and write for real purpose” (293). The instructors should not thus take new literacies as a

threat to the exercise of their scholarship, but rather take it as a more viable translation of the same. That said, the need on the part of the instructors, therefore, to rightfully address the concerns of the students in helping them comprehend new literacies that come in so many different forms goes in conversation with Selber who too emphasizes that “students need access to tenure-line faculty members who specialize in the study of literacy and computers” (131). However, this remains a thorny issue as many universities as such may not be able to ensure this provision. There is nonetheless no choice for the academia but to keep working in the direction of producing the human resource that is capable of guiding students through not just functional framework, but also through critical and rhetorical frameworks advanced by Selber.

One of the challenges behind effective implementation of multimodal writing is the mindset prevalent in the academia that it is the alphabetic texts that stand superior to multimodal compositions. Ben McCorkle and Jason Palmeri hold that “English teachers have tended to focus perhaps too narrowly on articulating how new media could be used to enhance alphabetic literacy instruction.” Further, English teachers “did not feel like an expert authority—a position in which they may even have needed to turn to students for technological advice and support.” The lack of technical expertise on the part of the English teachers has stood in the way of multimodal practice. They conclude that new media have been associated with tension and ambivalence since as “on the one hand, English teachers have sought to harness new media to teach traditional alphabetic reading and writing skills while also paradoxically engaging new media as a heuristic to rethink what the teaching of literacy entails.” Thus this desire to harness the new media and at the same time use it as heuristics has hindered the effective multimodal composition in the classroom.

Conclusion

This need for technologically informed faculty in writing will call for a situation which acknowledges that “teachers must be disposed to classroom settings that position them as true learners” (Selber 201). Thus, the teachers should be, shedding the inhibitions of their technological knowhow, prepared to work alongside the students in helping them overcome their technological hurdles by becoming “learners” themselves. That said, it is equally important that the institutions train the existing manpower to upgrade their alphabetical letter understanding potential to making better sense of other multimodal literacies. In *Multimodal Literacies and*

Emerging Genres, Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus present a collection that examines the possibilities and challenges of engaging with multimodal composition. These scholars study multitude of texts ranging from storyboards to speeches, and suggest the responsibility of instructors and institutions to “critically consider multimodal composition through the lens of audience, ethics, and effectiveness.” This perhaps speaks to Selber who asserts that we should move beyond situating technology solely in instrumental terms; instead we should situate it in broader, more socially contextual terms. This social context would call for audience and ethics consideration.

Diagnosing the handicaps of multimodal practice implementation in the classroom, Palmeri offers the following suggestions to multimodal composition instructors: They should develop flexible, multimodal strategies for inventing and revising alphabetic writing. Next, they must apply and adapt rhetorical and process-based theories to compose persuasive alphabetic, auditory, and visual texts. And finally, they need to develop critical literacies by employing a range of multimodal strategies for reseeding, rehearsing, and ultimately transforming the world. Similarly, Selber, talking about multiliteracies, holds that mere addition of computer technologies or interface change alone cannot “engender the kinds of social, political and pedagogical reform the profession is interested in” (188). In addition to pressing for the need for the “specialized faculty and supporting technical staff” teachers should be more trained in using technology, and this should be coupled with curricular reform, specific courses, and individual assignments, as well as departmental and institutional requirements. With the proliferation of the digital media and other forms of technical innovations taking place at an unprecedented pace, it can be assumed that the multimodality will only occupy greater weight in the curricula and require more attention.

To sum up, it would not be fair to treat multimodality as something separate from alphabetic compositions, but rather as a practice that further stretches the scope of such texts and helps address the communication needs of the students in a world increasingly dominated by non-standard media. As an RWS instructor who is still reluctant, perhaps almost imperceptibly, to an extent when it comes to embracing multimodal composition, I feel that there should be more workshops and trainings offered in regards to how writing instructors can effectively guide their students to produce multimodal documents and be able to employ functional, critical and rhetorical aspects of any technology, and not just the computer, without treating multiliteracies

as their rivals. In addition, the students should be informed about the importance and scope of multimodal composition in today's world. In all these, the academic institutions must offer a full support.

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