

Multimodality

Teaching multimodally and teaching multimodality are *not* the same as simply adding a “digital assignment.” A multimodal pedagogy is not just additive; rather, it is a stance, an orientation, and a privileging of the many ways of making and receiving meaning.

—Rick Wysocki et al., “On Multimodality: A Manifesto”

“All writing is multimodal,” write Cheryl Ball and Colin Charlton (2015). Multimodality means using multiple modes to make-meaning, and it also means understanding how each mode of communication (e.g., visual, aural, linguistic, spatial, gestural) privileges a particular audience to act, move, respond, or react in a certain way. Communication is dependent on the tools and resources available for us to compose, and an awareness of which mode would most effectively transmit the appropriate message to the intended recipient or audience. A multimodal approach to teaching writing moves beyond alphabetic text and challenges teachers and students to consider how different modes have different affordances that can reach different audiences. This approach to teaching pays close attention to how individuals are situated within contexts and culture (Arola & Wysocki, 2012).

The call to integrate multimodal assignments has increased in response to rapid technological changes over the last twenty years. Multimodal researchers and theorists like Jason Palmeri (2012) have traced the history of multimodal writing pedagogy back to the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Palmeri writes that writing teachers “have a substantial history of engaging analog technologies for composing moving images and sounds—a history that predates the rise of the personal computer” (2012, p. 6). Since the early 2000s, though,

multimodality has been extensively theorized in composition studies, given the rise of digital technologies. Research on multimodality usually bridges theory and practice and offers strategies for teaching writing through multimodal orientations (Khadka & Lee, 2019). This idea stems from The New London Group, a group of educators who met in the mid-1990s to discuss the “state of literacy pedagogy” after having concerns with traditional approaches that were too restrictive (e.g., monolingual, monocultural, rule-governed) and disconnected from social and cultural realities and futures. The New London Group proposed an approach to teaching called “multiliteracies” pedagogy⁴ that embraced the changing social environments in public and private life. Multimodality as a framework for teaching utilizes tools, technologies, and practices to engage with/in communities. This approach considers how images, videos, sounds, gestures, speech, and texts are all used to make meaning.

A multimodal approach to teaching writing invites students to explore various literacies: “Composition classrooms can provide a context not only for talking about *different* literacies, but also for *practicing* different literacies” (Selfe, 2009, p. 643). Multimodality asks us to practice and engage in different experiences that increase critical thinking of texts and technologies and that bring attention to rhetorical awareness and genre knowledge. Thus, a multimodal approach gives students opportunities to make choices about what modes and mediums are available to communicate most effectively given a specific rhetorical situation. Multimodal assignments include brochures, advertisements, memes, podcasts, infographics, videos, posters, websites, zines, and scrapbooks.

A multimodal approach to teaching writing also focuses on materiality, production, circulation, and reception. Which brings greater attention to how knowledge is produced and circulated within communities (Luther et al., 2017). For example, teachers might consider DIY culture and self-publishing, or the remaking of old media with new, or the relationship between writing and technology. In first-year writing, this might look like asking students to research alternative cultures (e.g., punk rock bands) and the genres these communities use to communicate. This inquiry could then be used to examine

4 “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” (1996)

cultural values embodied within genres. For instance, students can analyze zines as rhetorical activism, how zines work to resist norms and hierarchies. Zines can be used to talk about power and privilege and resistance. Or teachers and students could focus on the materiality of zines, the combination of alphabetic texts and images held on by glue and coated with glitter. The first-year writing class becomes a site to study [counter]cultural histories and how zines make [counter]cultural arguments that circulate in underground scenes and that are influenced by feminist rhetorics.

Additionally, a multimodal approach might invite students to investigate specific meaning-making practices. A teacher can encourage students to think about the nuances of multimodality through the ways in which they experience different mediums, like *sound*. Steph Ceraso (2014) writes, “Sound is an especially ideal medium for better understanding multimodal experiences because unlike visual or tactile experiences, interactions between sound and the body depend on vibrations” (p. 104). She offers *multimodal listening* to “expand how we think about and practice listening as a situated, full-bodied act . . . [which] can help students develop a deeper understanding of how sound is manipulating their feelings or behaviors in different situations” (p. 103). A multimodal approach to teaching brings awareness to the interconnected nature of composing, circulation, interpretation, and meaning-making. It offers opportunities for self-reflection on how different modes and mediums are felt and experienced.

INTERVIEWS

The following interviews attempt to capture some of the complexities of multimodality and how different teachers embrace multimodal pedagogies and practices. Many of these conversations will reveal how multimodal approaches overlap with other pedagogies, too. Jody Shipka starts by offering a brief definition that suggests teachers see multimodality as including but “not limited to the digital.” Shipka offers multimodal assignments like composing on clay tablets, making scrapbooks, and macarons. Meanwhile, Laura Gonzales and Stephanie Vie talk about incorporating digital technologies and spaces (e.g., social media) in writing classes. Gonzales defines digital rhetorics and says that “tools and technologies are not

neutral.” Christina V. Cedillo talks about how she intersects disability studies with multimodality. She offers “critical multimodality” as one way to examine how multimodality privileges some bodies over others. Vie concludes by talking about how writing teachers can intentionally and ethically incorporate technology.

Shane to Jody Shipka: How would you define a multimodal approach to composition? [Episode 30: 12:44–15:07]

For me what’s been really important is to remind people to advocate for the position that a multimodal approach to writing, or to composing, includes but is not limited to the digital. So I think beyond the square or rectangle of the paper or the screen. There are so many other modes and senses that we can draw on to make meaning, to tell our stories, to move people to some kind of action or emotion. I’ve been really clear about that and bothered by the ongoing conflation of multimodality as digital media or new media.

The other thing that I think is really important . . . is thinking about new media in a historical context and to recognize, as Jason Palmeri and other people have talked about, that all media at one point in time was new and came with its own struggles and baggage. I’m mindful of that, that old analog forms of communication or media can be new to the user or new to the user’s purpose.

I’ve been really, really mindful of that. When we talk about *new media*, it’s not just digital . . . I routinely have students compose on clay tablets. This is new to them and comes with a whole lot of questions about, “How do I use this? What do I use it for? How does it cause my body to work?” Right? I think in both cases we need to be mindful that multimodality includes but is not limited to the digital, and we need to think about the newness of media, not only historically, but in the biography or lifespan of the user.

Shane to Jody Shipka: What multimodal assignments do you use, and what is the biggest source of resistance for students in terms of

perceiving and interacting with these types of assignments? [Episode 30: 15:08–19:44]

A lot of the assignments that I did in first-year comp have been ones that I've modified for courses I teach now. One of my approaches to multimodality privileges choice . . . I think early on people misunderstood my work as demonizing print linear forms. I've really tried to underscore, even though a lot of students choose to do things other than a standard-looking research paper, that it is always an option for them to pursue. It's always been about, what is it that you want to accomplish? What do you want your work to do? What choices do you have, right? What are the final forms that would allow you to do that? If you want to inform, you want to persuade, you want to humor, what are the ways of doing that, right?

Part of my approach to multimodality has been about privileging choice, but . . . there'll always be non-negotiable elements to an assignment. But there's a lot of choice there. I think more than anything else there's the resistance that students tend to be more comfortable with or used to being given an assignment that says, "You must do this, this, this, and this," and my assignments tend to be, "Here's a situation. How can you respond to that? What work are you doing?"

If my goal is to tell you something about my life, what options do I have to do that? A memoir, a scrapbook, a home movie, a diary. Students see right away that it's not about privileging the final form, but about that work that you want or need to do. Then, it becomes, "What ways could we accomplish that?" Not all of those ways are going to be socially acceptable. Not all of those ways are going to get you the job, or the A, or whatever the goal is. I want students to always think about, "I did this, but I could have done this, this, and this," and then it becomes, "What's the difference?"

An example I use is there's no reason why, if you go for a job interview, that you couldn't go into the building and

write your resume in lipstick on a mirror, right? And then you sit down for the interview and they say, “Can I have your resume?” “Well, it’s in the bathroom,” right? This is probably not going to get you the job, but it could be done if you’re communicating that information. So it becomes a discussion of “Here are all the ways we could solve this communicative task, but which ones are socially acceptable?” I think this gets to genre. How much can you push up against genres? How much bagginess or elasticities does it have?

Shane to Jody Shipka: What would you say to someone interested in adopting a multimodal approach to teaching writing, and are there other texts and/or resources you would recommend? [Episode 30: 22:44–29:19]

The answer is different depending on how you see your approach, right? Is the multimodal going to be mostly digital? If so, are you going to tell students what they need to make? Is it going to be more open-ended and choice-based? I think part of what that requires, just as a kind of mindset, is a willingness and the ability to communicate to students that you’re learning with them. Not everybody can do that in the same way . . . I think it’s a risk to be able to foreground “I’m a student in this class, too,” particularly for students who expect you to know the answer and to know what’s right. It’s that willingness to learn a privileging of flexibility, being willing, both for the student and the teacher to continue to question, to linger in the uncertainty, to not privilege efficiency.

I would say to my students, “Inquiry ends with judgment and our job is to put off judgment as long as we possibly can and to continue to think about how could this be different. If we do things in this way, who does that privilege? Who does that silence?” I think that for this kind of approach that is beyond the digital, that is choice-based, there needs to be a willingness to trust that students will make good decisions and that is always really, really scary.

I've had to say, "But not this, but not that," in terms of what students can work with or how they can work with it.

The other thing is to see yourself as an expert in something. Like if I were to teach a course on designing macarons, I pretty much have an idea of what that's supposed to look like. If I had students all doing that, I could see myself going, "Oh, no, aesthetically, that doesn't work," or, "Why is it just one color? Why isn't it . . . ?" So I think it really helped me that I never felt like an expert in writing . . . I think students have helped me become more of an expert. Now, I've seen so many things in my time of teaching. Students will now say, "Well, I was kind of thinking about doing an object argument." "Oh, well, let me tell you about these other ones that I've seen." Right? The projects I get often take more time to grade. So again, with a mind toward people who don't have an office space, who might be freeway fliers, who are dealing with 120 students—I understand my privilege having smaller classes and being able to do this.

Shane to Laura Gonzales: Emphasizing digital rhetorics is another application of multimodality. You teach technical communication which allows you to do this work in dynamic ways. Can you talk about the intersections between digital rhetoric and technical communication? [Episode 21: 01:40–05:31]

A lot of people consider digital rhetorics related specifically to digital technologies and multimedia and making meaning or making arguments through different media, but I like to embrace a more expansive definition of digital rhetoric. Drawing on Angela Haas's work and her idea that digital rhetoric starts with our digits, our fingers, the way that we see the world. In addition, through our eyes and our bodies. Taking that approach has also helped me make connections between digital rhetoric and technical communication. Obviously technical communication has many different perspectives and definitions, but my orientation to technical communication is helping students understand how complex information can be adapted,

repurposed, remixed, and shared with a wide range of audiences both professionally and in the community, as well as academic audiences.

I think at the core of this is the idea that all tools and technologies, whether they're behind a screen or not, are always infused with cultural values. A lot of times we don't see these values because we assume they are just neutral, but as a lot of technical communication and digital rhetoric scholars have taught us, tools and technologies are not neutral. Things are designed for some people and inherently exclude some people. I use digital rhetoric as a way to teach my technical communication students that anything that they design is excluding and including certain people. That's okay because you can't design something for everybody, right? There's no general audience. But I try to help my students be more honest and aware of who they're excluding in their designs and who they're purposely including and what the implications of that are.

Digital rhetoric is a way for me to help my technical communication students understand that as it applies to the design of technical documentation . . . specifically we look at how different tools and technologies have been designed. It can be anything from like a form to sign up for a lease or a patient medical history form to a social media campaign or an ad. We use digital rhetoric to understand the implications of that design, and then apply that to our work as technical communicators.

One of the things that I really like about teaching technical communication is that I get to tell my students we don't just analyze things and look at them and critique them. We do that, but we're also builders of things. We're also designers ourselves. Technical communication lets me, and this is just how I perceive it, take digital rhetoric to the next level because it's not just analyzing different tools and technologies, but also building different tools and technologies. That's what I try to help my technical communication

students see . . . they have the power to make design decisions, make recommendations for designs based on their own experiences. Digital rhetoric is a way to do that ethically and responsibly.

Shane to Laura Gonzales: Your approach to teaching through digital rhetorics and multimodality also connects to language and culture. What does it mean to teach and use technology through a translanguing framework? [Episode 21: 11:40–15:43]

What I think is really useful about the translanguing framework is that it moves us away from this idea of languages as static things that can just be transported wholesale from one expression to another. So in our brains, we don't have containers labeled English and Spanish, for example . . . like that doesn't exist, right? All of our linguistic practices are always in our brain all the time. They're always interacting, they're always making connections to these things that we see and hear. So the way that we speak is not based on one single container of a language that we just decided to go into that day or for that expression and transport out. Whatever we say out loud is based on all of our language practices interacting all the time and interacting with other people as well.

That's the thing that I find really valuable in a translanguing approach is this move away from understanding that there's one standard English, one standard Spanish . . . but that languages are always changing. Languages are always in motion. Dictionaries are always growing, right? So language is always changing and being adopted by people because language is a tool that people use to communicate. I would say the same with technology . . . technology is always changing. There's not one right way to make a visual design or one right way to make a video that's always changing. So how can we take this translanguing approach understanding communicative practices as fluid and always changing and apply it to all the different options that we have when we compose in digital environments? . . . this expands students'

approaches or what they see as viable options for making an argument, or saying something in their writing.

It doesn't have to be standardized. It doesn't have to look like a five-paragraph essay. It can be drawing on multiple language practices and multiple technologies at once. It doesn't have to be a formal film. It can include some video and also some visual texts and also sounds. It doesn't have to be a polished podcast necessarily, but it can include some podcast elements that also have a transcript. Whatever students find to be most appropriate in a specific context. The translingual approach is nice because I can ground it in language. I can say, "How has language changed just in your lifetime to students or just in one context, or how do you change the way you speak based on who you're talking to? Like if you're talking to your parents or talking to someone at school, how do you change your language?" "Okay, well then how do you change the way that you communicate through technology?"

They'll tell me about different platforms they use to talk to different people . . . I open up that conversation for students so that we can say, "Okay, well what about us? Like we're talking to each other. How are we going to talk to each other in this class? How are you going to talk to me when you do your assignments? How are you going to talk to your peers? How are we going to talk to your community partners? If we're doing like a sort of service-learning project." There's a lot of options available to make those conversations be as dynamic as possible. What are we going to select and why?

Shane to Christina V. Cedillo: Your approach to teaching engages in multimodality and disability studies. Can you talk about a disability studies framework to multimodality and technology, potentially even what that means for teaching online? [Episode 29: 17:03–20:54]

Well, there's the really practical aspects. For example, how to design a PowerPoint with disabled audiences in mind

where you use alt-texts if you're going to upload that online. People on the CDICC (Committee on Disability Issues) and the disability SIG (Special Interest Group) in the Conference on College Composition and Communication have really been active in trying to get people to think through these things. So for example, providing conference copies in regular and large print. For most people they tend to think of that as a courtesy—and it's not. It's an appeal to multimodality because the person is there and you may be seeing them or listening to them and you also have access to the paper. As someone with ADHD, neurodivergent people can often use the paper to follow along . . .

It's like a recursive process. It's definitely an approach that has to be conditioned over time, right? Where people might not think about certain things, but then as you start trying to become much more open, inclusive, generous, you're like, "Oh, what about *this* group of people? What about *this* group of people?"

For me, I think that disability studies and also thinking about things like race and culture really opened the door to what I call a critical multimodality. Critical multimodality is when we think through multimodality from the perspective that automatically is going to center what has been construed as difference. Also, thinking through what difference itself allows to be an affordance. Just because we all have access to the same technology or media doesn't necessarily mean that those modes are going to mean the same depending on who we're talking to. Certain cultures are going to prefer certain things.

Disability studies . . . allows for us to really start considering what it could be to remix multimodality itself. Because for a long time, and this is my common argument, we've tended to privilege the digital . . . some students . . . might not have access to internet. What does that look like? When [Gunther] Kress is talking about limitations and

affordances, I think for a long time we've really taken those terms for granted without necessarily interrogating what it means to be an affordance. For example, now we can throw in a YouTube video and people can see what you're talking about . . . but that affordance isn't an affordance if you're talking about an audience that has visual impairment, right? Your reliance on that particular mode is actually a limitation.

Shane to Stephanie Vie: I know you incorporate social media (e.g., Twitter) in the writing classroom to help build collaboration and a sense of community. How do students respond to those technology-driven, social media-based assignments? How does multimodality help us better understand teaching writing? [Episode 3: 04:02–08:41]

So one of the things I've seen in my own teaching is that the majority of students are very open and are positive to the use of social media when/if pedagogically appropriate. But there is a small contingent of students who will have concerns, who don't want to put themselves out there. I want to honor that. Because I do research around privacy policies and around terms of service. I'm a very careful person in thinking about my own engagement in social media spaces, so I never want to have students . . . using technologies that make them feel uncomfortable from a privacy or an engagement kind of standpoint. That means I need to do some additional work at the beginning of a semester to consider alternatives, different assignments. If a student says, "You know, I don't feel comfortable creating a social media account." Now what? I think, for me at least, and this is going to be for every instructor to kind of think through, "What are your boundaries and what is your comfort level?"—I don't want to insist and say, "You know what, too bad, you're in this class and this is what you're going to do. If you don't like it, drop the class."

I would rather try to think about what was my learning goal; what were my outcomes; what did I want the student

to try to do; is there an alternative way that they could try to meet those goals that asks them to use a different social media tool, a different technological tool altogether? So that does mean that there is some additional learning that needs to happen in terms of scaffolding. But that to me, aligns with things kind of along the lines of universal design and learning. I'm going to try to make this class accessible to everybody . . . whether they're going to be having some privacy concerns or having engagement concerns, or whether they're pro social media . . .

From the studies I've done, we've found the majority of students find that social media use has some kind of positive correlation to their writing. In other words . . . we've talked with about 88 to 89 different students about the effects of social media use on their writing. A little less than half of them—47%—said I think it has a positive effect, only 2% of them said that I think using social media in my writing classes has some kind of negative effect on my writing. The interesting category I think is that 24% of them are unsure. When I look at the kind of responses about “Why are you unsure?” it points to a potential area for growth in social media with a pedagogical focus. That is, if you are not making a connection for the students, and if you're not scaffolding it throughout the semester . . . if you're not making it clear to them what is the purpose and what this has to do with writing and rhetoric, then it's going to seem like it's just an *add on*.

People in our field, Cindy Selfe especially, have been talking about you're not going to throw technology in as an add on. It needs to be something that's thoughtfully incorporated from the get-go. Students are savvy to that. What bothers them the most, at least from the responses to the survey and the follow-up interviews with undergraduate students and graduate students across the nation, they hate when they have to teach their teachers about technology . . . students want us to scaffold our classes really effectively.

Shane to Stephanie Vie: I'm hoping you could talk about our responsibilities as teachers to use emerging technologies in the writing classroom, and to do so responsibly and ethically? [Episode 3: 08:42–13:28]

There's a couple of different approaches that people tend to take. One is, "I'm not going to use these in my teaching because it takes a lot of time and there's a lot of concerns and there's a lot of challenges so I'm not going to use them." I don't think that confronts the reality of 21st century literacies and the world we live in where it doesn't matter if you are a student or a teacher, like we are using these technologies to compose and to communicate. So to sort of push it aside and ignore it because they are a problem seems itself problematic. Then, there's the other side which says, "I'm going to use these things, it's all going to be great, it's all going to be wonderful, my students are going to benefit," that doesn't think critically about the possible challenges and it doesn't think about the "what-ifs." This is also problematic because that's assuming that none of these challenges about privacy, surveillance, data mining, who has access to my data and where is it being shared, that those just don't exist and that technology in a class will always be positive.

One of the kinds of narrative threads that has always run through my research that I harp on continually because it is so important is this kind of critical approach to technology. If you are going to compose with and incorporate technology in your classroom, or into your life, I think it behooves you to be really critical about that: "What am I gaining? What am I giving up? What are some of the possibilities? What are some of the perils?"

So what should we do as teachers? I think that we have a responsibility to think about any technology we're going to incorporate in the classroom and think about what we need to do to incorporate this effectively and responsibly. What kind of conversations do we have to have with students ahead of time?

Maybe that means we're having some big picture conversations rather than just skills-based conversations. You know, "Here's how you use this tool, here's how we're going to use it in this class." But also, we may need to have some conversations about privacy and about data mining. In one class where we were using social media, we even had some real uncomfortable conversations, but generative conversations, about what happens with your social media accounts after you die. That's not something a lot of us want to confront or think about, but it's something more and more necessary these days. If I asked you to create a blog, or create a Wiki, or create webpage, you know, am I contributing to the mess that is abandoned web spaces online? Am I asking students to create something that's not going to have a life outside of the semester or this quarter that's just going to be out there cluttering it up, but it's part of your digital identity and digital footprint? So what activities am I asking my students to do that contributes to their digital footprint that's very hard to erase once established? I think we need to be thinking about that.

DENOUEMENT

Multimodal pedagogies are attuned to social, cultural, and historical contexts, and require an awareness of how multiple modes and mediums act and are acted upon by different kinds of audiences. As can be seen and heard through the interviews, a multimodal approach to teaching is often interconnected with other theories and practices (e.g., digital rhetorics, translanguaging, disability studies, cultural rhetorics), and thus can be used as a framework for examining language and culture. Adam Banks (2010) writes, "Black rhetorical traditions can form crucial links between oral, print, and digital communication and digitized, rhetoricized conceptions of access for African American users" (p. 12). Multimodality provides opportunities to investigate accessibility and other cultural issues and ideologies. As Selfe (1999) has argued, we can't ignore technology. Writing teachers must pay attention to how technologies embody assumptions, biases, values, and beliefs. Tools and

technologies aren't neutral. Selfe adds that writing teachers should consider how these tools can be used to help students become "better humanists" (p. 435).

I also think writing teachers can investigate how these tools and technologies can help complement core principles in our field, such as process-based orientations to teaching writing, accessibility, inclusivity, and universal design for learning, and how multimodality can work to reconceptualize traditional frameworks for assessment (Wood, 2018). A multimodal approach to teaching privileges choice and values accessibility, and it creates new pathways for student engagement and new possibilities to meet program outcomes and goals. I offer the following questions to help teachers think more about incorporating a multimodal approach to teaching:

- What kinds of modes and mediums complement writing classroom objectives (e.g., critical thinking, rhetorical awareness)? What multimodal texts can be used to support these learning outcomes? How would a multimodal assignment be assessed?
- How are multimodal texts produced, circulated, and received within communities?
- What are the affordances of inviting students to use different modes to compose? What are the advantages and disadvantages? And how might traditional assignments be modified and made more accessible to the widest range of students?
- What kinds of literacies are valued in my writing classroom? Does this include digital literacies? How am I going to address issues (e.g., privacy, surveillance, ethics) surrounding technology with students?
- What pedagogies (e.g., genre, cultural rhetorics) might help center multimodality?