Dada and Surrealism in the Composition Classroom: A Transgenre Approach to Basic Writing Pedagogy

Kristin LaFollette

ABSTRACT: The Dada and Surrealist movements are known for producing work that challenges reader-viewers' perceptions of reality. These movements also prompted creators to experiment with unexpected mediums and materials, and this can be seen through the intersection of visual art and writing. This essay emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of Basic Writing and proposes an approach that uses the tenets of Dada and Surrealism as starting points for enacting an arts-based, transgenre pedagogy. Focusing on three Basic Writing courses as case studies, the essay explores the benefits of this arts-based pedagogical approach and assignments that require students to engage in art-making and writing simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: arts-based; art-making; Basic Writing; composition; Dada; interdisciplinary pedagogy; Surrealism; transgenre; writing

With the recent passing of the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 shutting down in-person operations on university campuses, I've been reflecting deeply on what it means to be an instructor, composer, and researcher of writing and the humanities. The pandemic has changed how we think about teaching and learning. It has helped us understand our own strengths, weaknesses, and ability to adapt under pressure. And, for me, the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the importance of a flexible pedagogy that recognizes the uniqueness of each individual student, which I see as especially pertinent for instructors of Basic Writing. Basic writers often have numerous barriers to overcome as they navigate a developmental college course and frequently grapple with feelings of inadequacy and fear connected to past experiences with writing. These barriers were only made more difficult with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic; in the Basic Writing course I was

Kristin LaFollette *is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Southern Indiana where she researches and teaches courses on rhetoric, writing, and gender and sexuality studies.*

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.2021.40.1.02

teaching during the Spring 2020 semester, most of the students who were struggling ended up failing the course after the transition to virtual learning. With the concerns of the pandemic weighing heavily on me—safety, illness, shifts in work and family responsibilities—I can only imagine how they've affected students who are attempting to balance learning, work, and anxieties related to an uncertain future.

I take inspiration from Dada and Surrealism which, like teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrate just how much humanity needs and relies on creativity during difficult moments. Like the Dada and Surrealist movements that developed out of a need for escape from the chaos of war, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with necessary moments of creative expression. More than one hundred years after the end of World War I and the development of Dada and Surrealism, the COVID-19 pandemic has reemphasized that research on visual art and writing isn't just about *teaching students to write*. Rather, intersecting visual art and writing provides opportunities for students to, like Dada and Surrealist artists, help reader-viewers experience and perceive their subjects through a creative-critical lens. Reflecting on the past year in this way has helped me see the ways an arts-based approach to writing is beneficial even beyond the pedagogical benefits; being creative can provide a reprieve, a much-needed distraction, and a way for us to envision our lives and the world differently.

The pandemic presented a new moment for us to revisit and reevaluate the relationship between visual art and writing to recognize and appreciate the ways that both art and writing interact, intersect, and communicate. Similarly, the Dada and Surrealist movements challenged traditional notions in the art world surrounding *who* could be an artist and *what* could be art. By using various materials to create art and exploring dream-like subjects in their work, Dada and Surrealist artists expanded the field of possibilities while simultaneously removing the "highbrow" label. A similar development can be seen in Writing Studies over time; while writing was once considered to be "words on a page," the advancement of technology has changed the way we think about writing in contemporary classrooms. Jody Shipka's *Toward a Composition Made Whole* advocates for students choosing the composing form that best aligns with their goals and target audience. Further, Shipka encourages creativity in this process of choosing; students are invited to "experiment with alternative, hybrid, or diverse forms of discourse" (1). While the term "multimodal" is often considered to be synonymous with "digital," a multimodal composition is just as the term suggests: something created digitally or nondigitally using multiple modes, and regardless of the

form or modality, choice is critical to gaining rhetorical awareness. In "The Artistry of Composition," Vittoria Rubino writes that this analysis of "why or how the medium they chose is better than other modes they could have chosen" is a "critical skill for any designer" (129). From these two perspectives—multimodal composing and art and design—we can see the importance of giving students a broad choice of modalities to work with so they can clearly see and understand their rhetorical strategizing.

Composition has always been multimodal, and multimodal composing creates space for all ways of knowing, being, and communicating. In recent years, scholars including Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, Jason Palmeri, Cynthia Selfe, Anne Frances Wysocki, and Geoffrey Sirc have highlighted the numerous possibilities of multimodal composing. These possibilities range from digital tools—like audio and video—to physical projects—like the student project Shipka discusses in *Toward a Composition Made Whole* where an essay was written on a pair of ballet shoes. Multimodality has been and continues to be a crucial and pertinent pedagogical tool in composition classrooms and, in the current moment, students need creative outlets and forms of self-expression even more. In addition, these creative outlets and forms of self-expression can help important compositional skills stick beyond the writing classroom as students connect rhetorical strategizing with their interests, identities, and various situations within and beyond the academy. In this way, composers are enacting what Dada and Surrealist artists were working toward with their own work: using creativity as an outlet for escape and developing new and unique ways to communicate and connect with their reader-viewers. Just as Dada and Surrealism broaden understandings of what art is and who can be an artist, multimodality reminds us of the possibilities in writing and for writers.

Building from the Dada and Surrealist movements and with a focus on Basic Writing, this essay highlights three important skills encouraged through an arts-based pedagogical approach: creative-critical thinking, an understanding of transfer, and freedom of expression. To bolster these discussions, I provide an overview of three case studies: Basic Writing courses taught during the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters where this arts-based approach was enacted. While this approach is valuable for writing students at every level, I argue that it can be especially beneficial for basic writers. For all the reasons that deficit views of writing, and sometimes insufficiently resourced instruction, follow basic writers, the Basic Writing classroom may feel disembodied and disengaged. The arts-based approach I advocate for, however, encourages ownership and buy-in by recognizing that "writers are

not separate from the writing they produce" and that "the act of writing is less about using a particular skill set than about developing a sense of who we are" (Komlos 68). Not least, an arts-based approach shows students that identities and experiences that have previously been discounted in academic spaces are important and necessary. This allows for more openness and engagement and, as students develop as writers, they can navigate varying contexts, adapting their approach based on the unique purpose and audience of the situation. They are at once practicing creative-critical thinking and freedom of expression while seeing the ways these skills transfer to other contexts.

In addition to building from Dada and Surrealism, I frequently rely on the work of Ames Hawkins in conceptualizing this arts-based approach. An artist, writer, and scholar, Hawkins' work exemplifies the freedom and flexibility that can come from intersecting image and text. One example of Hawkins' arts-based, genre-bending work includes "Courting the Peculiar," a project that will be referenced throughout this essay. "Courting the Peculiar" is a collaborative project where Hawkins and others argue for creative nonfiction as a "queered" genre that resists binary thinking. Like Dada and Surrealist work, "Courting the Peculiar" challenges norms through a unique format and delivery; the project began as a conference presentation where each panelist performed responses to a series of questions and then developed into a multimodal piece published in the journal *Slag Glass City*. Like Dada and Surrealist work that challenged dominant norms in the art world, "Courting the Peculiar" opens up the possibilities for writing by breaking down preexisting expectations and creating space for alternative forms that celebrate identity.

Dada and Surrealism: Approaching Transgenre

The Art Movements. The intersecting of visual art and writing gained momentum during the Dada and Surrealist movements; these movements encouraged a reimagining of what art could be and who could create art during a time when people needed a creative outlet and escape from reality (much like our current moment). Dada and Surrealism developed in Europe during World War I as a result of the apprehension and anxiety associated with war and new technological and industrial progress. Early pioneers of Dada and Surrealism began creating work—art, writing, and work that combined art and writing, like collages—that was revolutionary in getting people to think in new, creative ways. As David Hopkins writes, "The [Dada

and Surrealist] artist's task was to move beyond aesthetic pleasure and to affect people's lives; to make them see and experience things differently. The Surrealist goal, for instance, was nothing less than the French poet Arthur Rimbaud's call to 'change life'" (3). An enactment of this task to make viewers "see and experience things differently" is present in one of artist René Magritte's most well-known paintings, *The Treachery of Images*. The painting depicts an image of a pipe with a caption that states "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," or "This is not a pipe." Most would look at the image and say that it *is* a pipe, but after thinking about it more thoroughly as the artist intended, it's clear that it isn't really a pipe, but an image of a pipe. Curator and author Fiona Bradley describes this tension in the following way:

> A brief moment of disorientation ensues until the contradiction is resolved—it is not a pipe, but rather a painting of a pipe. Neither the image nor the caption is lying to the viewer. The painting does, however, act out the warning implied by its title: the image is so illusionistic that it is treacherous, making us 'see' something (a real pipe) that is not really there. (41)

This tension and shifting of perception points to Dada and Surrealist genius in that the object moves from being an object to an image in a striking way, exemplifying how work that combines both image and text encourages reader-viewers to interact with and think critically about the art to establish new meaning.

Because of their focus on "free thinking" and creating unique experiences for reader-viewers, the movements avoided true definitions or labels. Hopkins writes, "Like certain other 20th-century art movements such as Futurism, which reflected the speeded-up, multi-sensory world in which people in the first decade of the 20th century were living, Dada and Surrealism were committed to probing experience itself" (3-4). He continues by stating,

> This commitment to lived experience meant that Dada and Surrealism were ambivalent about the idea of art as something sanctified or set apart from life. This is a fundamental point, and it is why it is inappropriate to treat Dada and Surrealism as identifiable stylistic 'isms' in art history. In actual fact there was comparatively little stylistic homogeneity among the artists involved, and literature was as important to them as visual art. It would be more accurate to describe these movements as ideas-driven, constituting attitudes to

> life, rather than schools of painting or sculpture. Any form, from a text to a 'ready-made' object to a photograph might be used to give Dada or Surrealist ideas embodiment. (Hopkins 4)

Dada and Surrealist artists were working to break down barriers in the art world which gave certain people access and privileged particular styles and forms. They saw art as something that was inseparable from everyday life and, as a result, were open to using anything to create art. This can be seen with "ready-mades," objects not normally considered art (one example is artist Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal presented as a sculpture). In addition, as Hopkins points out, Dada and Surrealist artists were invested in writing, as well, and often integrated it into their art.

Collages were the epitome of Dada and Surrealist art in that they could be created by anyone using any materials, like paper scraps, tickets, or newspapers that could be layered or glued together. Artist and writer Max Ernst was a pioneer in the creation of surrealist collages, and several books resulted from his substantial collage work, including *La Femme 100 Têtes* or *The Hundred Headless Woman*. His collages create tensions between image and text, convey dream-like scenes, and challenge reader-viewers' perceptions of what they see and know. In *The Hundred Headless Woman*, each collage contains a caption that propels the narrative forward, but the captions don't always seem to "fit" with the images; instead, as the words interact with the visual art, reader-viewers are challenged to reimagine what they are seeing and experiencing. The visual art doesn't stand on its own, just as the words aren't disconnected from the imagery; the two elements create a curated experience for the reader-viewer and break down preconceptions about visual art and writing. A collage of a man observing a girl sitting in a machine is accompanied by a caption that reads, "Where you can see a charming little insect with metallic hair" (Ernst 47). Since the image and text seem to be at odds, audiences must shift their perspective and reimagine new meaning.

Toward Transgenre. Because multimodality is often conflated with only the digital, I adopt the term "transgenre" from Ames Hawkins to describe the work and pedagogical approach I advocate for throughout this essay. In the beginning phases of working on my arts-based dissertation as a doctoral student, Hawkins introduced me to the term "transgenre." While I originally used the term "hybrid-genre" to refer to work that incorporates multiple genres and/or modalities, Hawkins suggested I use the term "transgenre" instead. They noted that "transgenre" better reflects the "messiness" of

composing and works against binary thinking about a composition being *this or that*. With this understanding of "transgenre" as being open to numerous possibilities, I theorized an arts-based pedagogical approach in my dissertation project for intermediate writers. In my current position as the developmental writing specialist at my university, I wanted to adapt that approach to examine how transgenre composing can work against limiting binaries, traditions, and expectations and teach important rhetorical skills in Basic Writing classrooms.

In an email conversation with Hawkins early in my dissertation process, they wrote, "I really resist the term hybrid [as it] anticipates and nearly desires a particular outcome. . . I don't know that any one form is better than another, but I guess I am partial to ecological diversity and believe that the more forms we have, the better." In subsequent conversations and the interview Hawkins contributed to my arts-based dissertation, they shared that, through encountering autoethnography and literary nonfiction, they discovered there were other authors who were experimenting with form and style in the same way they were. They are rarely interested in only composing a piece of research or putting together a scholarly essay, but instead consider how various genres can contribute to a particular project. Hawkins sees transgenre work as a collaboration of genres, moving between and among forms and transforming those forms into new, alternative forms. Additionally, they consider transgenre work to be personal and note that, through the personal, scholarship can appeal to broader audiences because of the visceral and relatable nature of personal narrative.

Frequently moving between and among forms, Hawkins' work is representative of the possibilities available through transgenre composing. Their project, "Exhuming Transgenre Ties," featured in a special issue of *Enculturation* on cultural rhetorics, is not only a manifestation of what transgenre work can look and sound like, but it also conveys how creating transgenre work is deeply creative and embodied. The almost 18-minute video project begins with an image of a bookshelf on the beach; like Dada and Surrealist work, the project pairs unlikely objects to encourage creative-critical thinking. As the video goes on, Hawkins is shown walking near and on the beach while narrating and discussing their "comfort with [their] masculinity" and "permission to embrace [their] love of ties." Pushing against traditional expectations of academic research (i.e., impersonal, text-based, publishable in a print journal), the project weaves storytelling and personal narrative with conversations on embodiment and identity.

As "Exhuming Transgenre Ties" highlights, our embodied subjectivities and identities are a necessary component of transgenre composing because, as Hawkins notes, quoting scholar Daisy Levy, "bodies are always in relation to the world around them, to other bodies, and that, truly, there is no good or bad body." Later in "Exhuming Transgenre Ties," Hawkins writes that wearing a tie "on their transgender/genderqueer body" is not just text or performance, but rather marks Hawkins "with and in relationship to male dress" to help control the story their body communicates to the world. "Courting the Peculiar" similarly makes connections between composing, embodiment, and identity. Hawkins writes that they identify with Kazim Ali's statement that "'genre, like gender, is not so much passé as it is *boring*.'" As Hawkins points to, traditional ways of categorizing people and writing don't allow for true creative-critical thinking and freedom of expression. Transgenre compositions like "Courting the Peculiar" and "Exhuming Transgenre Ties" create space for identity, the self, and the body, at once challenging norms about genre and academic expectations and giving writers agency over their work (see figure 1).

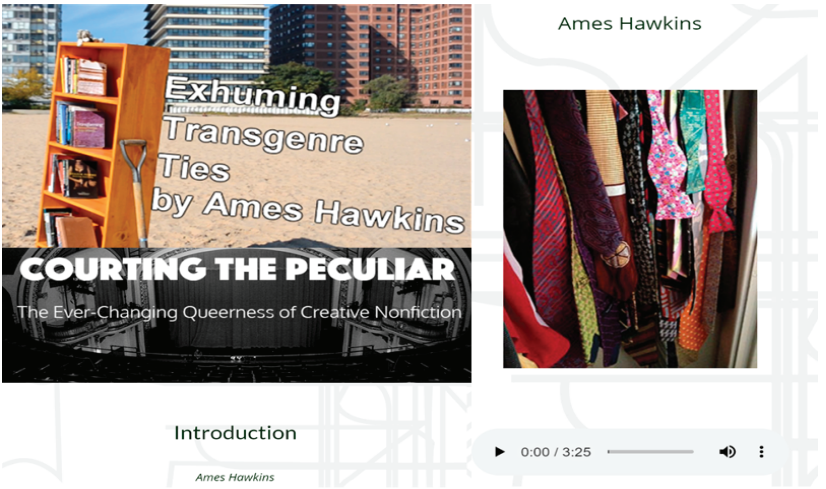

Figure 1. Snapshots of Hawkins' "Exhuming Transgenre Ties" and collaborative project "Courting the Peculiar."

This resistance to binary thinking and space for identity and agency is likewise possible in Basic Writing classrooms through transgenre composing. As Rubino notes in referring to the work of scholar Diana George, "The pull between words and images is productive, and if we can only trust and empower students to follow their own line of enquiry and uncover multimodal means of communication, we may be surprised by the work they produce in our classes" (127). Trusting and empowering students to "follow their own line of enquiry" allows them to integrate their own embodied subjectivities, identities, and experiences into their work. As Hawkins points out in "Courting the Peculiar," transgenre composing creates opportunities and challenges the concept that writing is rote or follows a particular prescription. At the start of a project, transgenre composers don't need to know "where it is [they're] going, sure of [their] argument, confident of [their] approach" (Hawkins et al.). Transgenre composing is a process that creates space for messiness and making and unmaking. There is no "right" way to be a transgenre composer; rather, in the process of exploring form, students can discover what works for them, their project, their audience, and their way of knowing and being.

An Arts-Based, Transgenre Pedagogy for Writing Studies and Basic Writing

Writing Studies is still gaining momentum when it comes to discussions of art's role in scholarship and pedagogy and, while multimodality valorizes the visual, not many scholars have examined multimodality through an arts-based lens. Our field has been focused on multimodality through a digital lens for quite some time, and while I encourage digital composing in almost all my courses, it's exciting that work from scholars like Kate Hanzalik, Nathalie Virgintino, Joddy Murray, Rubino, Hawkins, and others continues to shift how we think about multimodal composing as linked to art. In rethinking multimodality through an arts-based lens, instructors can foster a reimagining of the role visual art can play in writing classrooms. As Joddy Murray writes, "To value interdisciplinarity is to value the work of other disciplines, and this includes art. The claim that only art deals directly with the visual is as obviously short-sighted as to claim that only the empiricism of the scientific method is epistemic, or that only the social sciences can effectively research cultures and societies" (326). Rubino echoes Murray by outlining the benefits of embracing an arts-based pedagogical approach: "Many themes already overlap in art and composition theory

and pedagogy, including a privileging of process, freedom of expression, discussion and collaboration, and compositional flexibility" (125).

Meanwhile, Geoffrey Sirc's "Box-Logic" expands the possibilities of multimodality and transgenre work in composition classrooms by using Duchamp's *Green Box* as a springboard. Like Hawkins, whose work consistently challenges binary thinking, Duchamp's *Green Box* pushes the boundaries of genre as it is an assemblage of notes, diagrams, and images. Sirc builds upon this idea of an assemblage by stating that it's a form "[he feels his] students. . . could work well within" (112). Much like Duchamp's *Green Box*, Sirc's "box" concept is a collection or archive. He writes, "In terms of transcending essayist prose. . . [the box] allows both textual pleasure, as students archive their personal collections of text and imagery, and formal practice in learning the compositional skills that seem increasingly important in contemporary culture" (Sirc 114). Like collages, box assignments allow students to intentionally bring materials together—"associational juxtapositions of word, image, and sound" (124)—and arrange them appropriately through practicing the "key compositional arts of selection, arrangement, and expression" (125). Box assignments are simply structured to allow for creative-critical thinking and freedom of expression, and Sirc notes several assignment possibilities, like having students compose photo essays, build a catalogue of materials related to a specific date in history, or document class sessions using a medium of their choosing, including photography or audio recording (129). He writes that experimenting with multiple modalities and forms helps students learn to compose in ways that emphasize individual identity and expression and that embracing the personal works to break down the binaries of "academic" vs. "creative," and "scholar" vs. "creative writer," much like Dada and Surrealist artists were challenging traditional norms in the art world.

Just as Writing Studies has underscored the benefits of embracing multimodality in the classroom, Basic Writing scholarship points to the importance of giving students opportunities to choose their composing form. In their essay "Remembering Basic Composition," Thomas Henry, Joshua Hilst, and Regina Clemens highlight the importance of a Basic Writing pedagogy that allows for freedom of choice. They note that, since we all communicate using various modes, including "reading and writing print-based text, text-messaging, social networking, and using Internet, video, audio, radio, television, visual images, and cinema," we should move beyond only teaching students as if they communicate using print-based text (Henry et al. 4). In addition, Basic Writing scholars outline the impor-

tance of arts-based projects and their impact on basic writers' development of key compositional skills. In "Storyboarding for Invention," Jon Balzotti advocates for intersecting image and text through storyboards and notes that "better transfer is possible when we employ a broader notion of what gets transferred or exchanged" (65). Barbara Z. Komlos' "'That's Me on a Horse of Many Colors': Native American College Students' Self-Portraits as Academic Writers" explores connections between identity and composition through art-making. In her study, Native students were asked to draw self-portraits of themselves as writers to unveil their "understandings of and dispositions toward academic writing" (Komlos 71). By asking students to create visual art (self-portraits) through the low-stakes process of considering and reflecting on their writing practices, Komlos was able to learn that, while there are similarities among all basic writers despite cultural background, it's important to recognize the unique experiences and perspectives of Native students in college writing classrooms (93). In "iBooks Portfolios," Thomas Peele and Melissa Antinori similarly emphasize the importance of an embodied pedagogy in Basic Writing classrooms. They write that, while some students might feel marginalized because of their placement into Basic Writing, non-traditional projects (like transgenre compositions) can allow them to draw on their identities, experiences, and knowledge of audience in powerful ways (Peele and Antinori 29).

As Writing Studies and Basic Writing scholars have pointed out, allowing students to choose their composing form "meets them where they are." It privileges their already-existing abilities, identities, and experiences, which is especially important for basic writers who feel sidelined in traditional classroom spaces. While multimodal composing provides opportunities for students to build upon their identities and think critically about their goals and their audience, a transgenre approach further emphasizes working beyond traditional genres. The possibilities are limitless, and for basic writers who may lack confidence in their skills, transgenre composing (like Dada and Surrealist art) conveys that anyone can be a writer and writing can be anything. Similar to the process of assembling a box as outlined in Sirc's "Box-Logic," transgenre composers select and arrange materials that work together to create meaning and communicate beyond what is possible when adhering to expectations of genre. Transgenre composing encourages deep creative-critical thinking, teaches important rhetorical skills, and allows students to experiment and create in new ways while considering their own interests and identities as starting points.

The Study

I used an arts-based, transgenre pedagogical approach in my Basic Writing classes during the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters at the University of Southern Indiana (USI). Two sections of the course were taught in the fall while one was taught in the spring; they were full-semester, 16-week courses focused on preparing students for success in our two-course first-year writing sequence. USI is a mid-sized institution with over 10,000 students and 150 student organizations. The university serves many students in the local and surrounding communities and the state of Indiana as a whole with about 80% of students as in-state residents. The majority of the students in these classes were White, women, and attending college right after high school. My purpose in implementing this approach was to observe how intersecting visual art and writing impacted basic writing students' compositional skills and learning experiences. Moreover, in giving students space to be creative-critical thinkers and creators, I wanted to see students bring their own identities and interests into their compositions and investigate the unique ways they worked beyond the confines of academic writing. While the English department at USI offers multiple emphases for majors (creative writing, literature, professional writing and rhetoric, and teaching), and a broad range of classes for non-majors, the majority of the faculty specialize in literature. Currently, only four faculty members specialize in Writing Studies, so the development of new courses and the integration of new approaches into existing Writing Studies courses has been a slow process. In bringing this arts-based approach into my Basic Writing classes, I hoped to initiate more conversations about embracing alternative approaches to writing to my department. In addition, I hoped students would feel a deep connection to and investment in their work and see themselves as composers in multiple, varying contexts.

While teaching the three courses, I kept a research journal where I recorded my observations of class discussions and interactions, student projects, and student reflections on the process of transgenre composing. After the Spring 2020 semester ended, I began sorting and organizing these notes by highlighting and color-coding similarities and differences among the classes and student projects. This required paying close attention to student attitudes toward transgenre composing, responses to in-class activities where students analyzed and discussed images and transgenre compositions, and reflections on the rhetorical strategizing involved with transgenre composing. I also had the difficult task of selecting only a few

student projects and reflections to focus on in this essay. After reviewing my notes on the many memorable student projects, I chose a few samples that represented the broad range of compositional skills that can be gained through a transgenre approach. I outline these observations here to display how assignments that incorporate both visual art and writing can help basic writing students develop creative-critical thinking and an understanding of transfer through freedom of expression and greater buy-in.

Case Study Profiles. Moving forward, I will refer to the case study courses as Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3. To provide background and context for each class, I've included brief profiles below:

- Class 1 (20 students) was taught during the Fall 2019 semester. The class ran three days a week and met at 9:00 a.m. Overall, the students participated well in class discussions and easily collaborated with each other. Several students claimed they were in the class by default because they hadn't taken the placement exam.
- Class 2 (17 students) was taught during the Fall 2019 semester. Like Class 1, this class ran three days a week, but met at 10:00 a.m. The students were often quiet and weren't always eager to collaborate. Several students consistently stated they hadn't done well in past writing classes and noted they were afraid of failing and having to retake the course. This concern was present from the beginning of the class and appeared to be unrelated to the course content and/or arts-based assignments.
- Class 3 (22 students) was during the Spring 2020 semester and was mostly made up of students who didn't pass Basic Writing during the fall semester. There were only a few students who consistently participated in class discussions and asked questions, and while we started the semester face-to-face (meeting three days a week at 1:00 p.m.), we ended up moving online after spring break due to COVID-19. The class began with 22 students and unfortunately ended with 15, and less than half of those remaining students passed.

Results: Students' Compositions

Fall 2019 was my first semester as an Assistant Professor; fresh out of a doctoral program where I had just completed a dissertation on transgenre composing for intermediate writers, I was ready to expand that research and

explore how arts-based assignments impact basic writers. On top of this, my desire to pursue this research was guided by the fact that there aren't many conversations taking place on multimodality in Basic Writing (Henry et al. 2), and discussions on arts-based or transgenre approaches are even less prominent. To facilitate transgenre composing in the Basic Writing courses, I developed two arts-based assignments. The first—a profile essay—required students to interview a professor at the university in their major on teaching, research, and writing practices and construct a profile of that professor. In addition, students were also asked to create a visual representation of the profile (using photography, a collage or drawing, etc.). To provide a justification of the visual and the rhetorical thinking that went into it, students were required to write an additional paragraph explaining the visual. Questions they could respond to in the justification included the following: *How is your visual a representation of your profile? Why did you choose that form? Why did you choose those materials, images, colors, words, etc.? Why did you arrange your visual that way?* While the visual needed to represent their essay in some way, students were encouraged to move beyond just illustrating the writing. Instead, I reminded the students to be as creative as possible and to, as Rubino notes, "create pressure between words and images" to "see the way items work, or do not work, together or independently" (129). Like Dada and Surrealist artists, I wanted students to practice creative-critical thinking and freedom of expression to challenge the reader-viewer to think about the profile differently.

When I first introduced this project and the necessary visual art component, many students were apprehensive. While I explained that the visual art was a way for them to practice creative-critical, rhetorical thinking and that they could use any medium they wanted, the students repeatedly asked what the visual *should* be and they wanted to see specific examples. One student in Class 1 mentioned that she felt uneasy about the assignment and wondered if I would grade her visual art harshly because it wouldn't be "good" or what I "asked for." I assured students that I was not approaching the assignment in this way and reminded them that they wouldn't be graded on their artistic ability, but rather on their ability to exercise creative-critical thinking and articulate the rhetorical choices that went into creating the visual art. Because of the concern surrounding the assignment, I created a sample visual—a collage made with paper, acrylic paint, photography, and some found images—and shared it with Classes 1 and 2 to provide an example of the form the visual could take. The collage fit the assignment they were working on—a profile—and was an artistic representation of poet Sylvia

Plath. When I presented the artwork to the class, I encouraged students to ask me any questions they wanted. The students in Class 1 were mostly quiet, but a few asked what the artwork meant to me while one student offered his own perspective on the piece. I ended the class session by explaining how each element of the collage represented Plath in some way, articulating my rhetorical decision-making process along the way and modeling what I was asking students to do in the assignment. In Class 2, the students asked many insightful questions. One student asked why I included a particular image and why it was in the center of the page, and another asked why I chose the colors I did (see figure 2).

For Class 3, I shared a different collage that was created digitally, but was another representation of Plath. The image contained several multi-colored typewriters on a stairway with words I pulled from Plath's *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Like Class 2, Class 3 asked many insightful questions about the piece and articulated that they were able to better grasp what they were being asked to do in their own visual art (see figure 3).

Figure 2. The collage I shared with Classes 1 and 2.

In all three classes, there were students who ended up creating digital collages using images of the professor found online and other images that represented concepts, hobbies, or interests the professor mentioned in the interview, but there were several students who took more creative approaches. In Class 1, one student represented her interviewee/profile using

a handmade book with images from famous works of literature on the front and back covers and with popular literary excerpts and quotes on the inside pages. In creating this collaged book, the student took seriously the concept that *anything* can be art (see figure 4). In her required visual justification paragraph, she wrote,

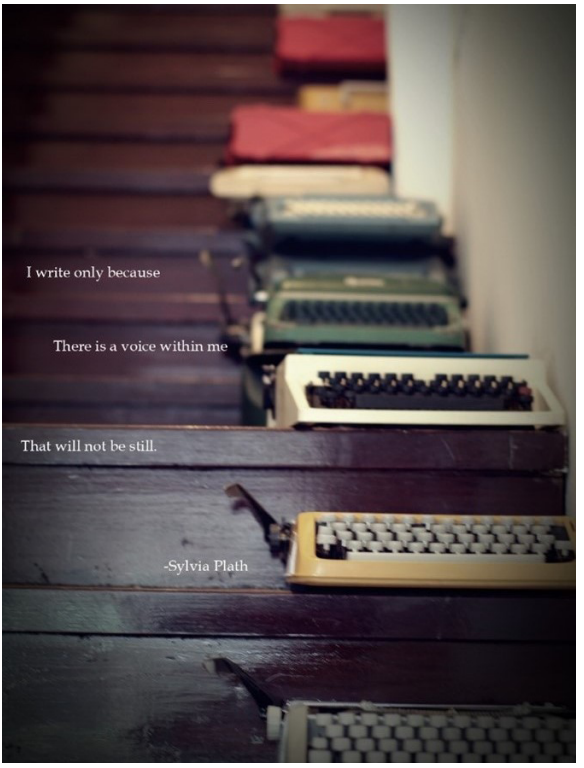

Figure 3. The digital collage I shared with Class 3.

> The cover is a collage of different literary characters made up of fantastic explorers, dark figures, and whimsical characters. They are happy, sad, afraid, determined, wicked, great, and terrible all at the same time. I chose them because I believe that these characters represent what it is like to be human. . . There is an ocean of depth in each of us and, through books, we can understand our past and our future.

Using these characters as a springboard, the student went on to say that her visual art expressed the humanity she felt and experienced during the

interview. Rather than a direct illustration of the profile, the collaged covers and inner pages of the book used literary references to portray what the interviewee shared about her journey. This was not only a great representation of Dada and Surrealist work but was also a well-written justification of the choices that went into creating the artwork. There were several other fantastic student projects, including one from Class 3 where the student created

Figure 4. A student created a handmade book as the visual component for the profile project.

a handmade trebuchet to represent his interest in history, and used balls of aluminum foil to show the class that it was a working model (see figure 5).

I was able to see students' increased understanding of how visuals convey meaning and how art can work with and enhance writing through the profile project. In Class 3, one student, an art major, interviewed the

chair of the art and design department. For her visual, she put together a collage of some of the professor's artwork, writing that the interview helped her realize that it is possible to make a living as an artist and that she should continue pursuing her passion for art-making. She went on to say that the oil paintings she compiled for her visual were meant to represent her inter-

Figure 5. A student crafted a handmade trebuchet as the visual component for the profile project.

viewee, a professor and artist "who is caring and nurturing. Someone who is bright and colorful. Someone who went against the grain and went for her happiness." The student drew attention to the colors in her visual and connected them to her interviewee, noting that the pinks and oranges in the paintings represented her bright personality. This communicates clear creative-critical, rhetorical thinking; the student created a visual with her interviewee in mind, wanting to represent her as a person. This shows an understanding that visuals hold and communicate meaning, and, for this student, creating the collage and articulating its connection to the interview were very specific choices that helped reader-viewers experience her project in a different way.

Another representation of clear creative-critical thinking and freedom of expression can be seen in a project from a student in Class 2. Her visual—a digital collage that resembled a roadmap and outlined her interviewee's journey to becoming a professor—was accompanied by a page-long articulation

of her rhetorical choices where she went into depth about every aspect of the visual (the colors, the use and meaning of specific images and/or materials, etc.). One of the elements of her articulation that I found most interesting was her description of *why* she arranged the materials in the way she did. The student wrote that she "put everything in a random position because that is the beauty about life, you never know where you are going to end up in life. You might end up on a roller coaster but in the end, you wish it hadn't gone any other way." This description doesn't just discuss the various elements within her visual, but specifically makes note of why she put them in a seemingly random arrangement. The arrangement is connected to the interview and adds to the telling of the interviewee's story; he explored many career paths prior to becoming a professor, and this student wanted to further convey that to her audience through the disparate arrangement of materials in her visual.

While the first assignment gave students the option to choose their artistic form, the second assignment—an analytical essay—asked students to create art in a very specific way: through photography. Below is a brief overview of the assignment:

> This assignment requires you to take a photograph (on your phone, tablet, or using a camera from the library) and compose a 3-page analysis of the photograph. After taking a photograph, you should analyze the image by responding to the following: *What does the image mean? What story is it attempting to tell? What aspects of the photograph communicate that message (color, subject, object, texture, angle, perspective, etc.)? What larger ideas does the image promote?*

Many students expressed that they hadn't previously thought of photography as an art form, especially since people can take photographs at any time using electronic devices like smartphones; however, my hope was that this would make photography a more approachable art form illustrating that anyone can be an artist, since so many already have experience with taking photographs (on a camera, phone, or other device). We talked about considering color, subject, object, texture, angle, and perspective and using those elements to tell a story through image. As a photographer myself, I shared many original photographs with each class, and we worked through the questions that were posed in the assignment prompt.

One image we used as a sample was a photo I had taken of a broken, overgrown fence with a hole in it and several garbage cans behind it. In each

class, I asked the students to talk about what they noticed in the photograph, and several noted the contrast between the plants and the fence, the position of the garbage cans, and the dilapidated nature of the fence. Based on those observations, Class 2 determined the photograph was representing nature's resiliency as it appeared the plants were "taking back" what was theirs (see figure 6). For the project, students took photographs on campus, at their homes, of their friends and family, and in posed shots they set up themselves. One student in Class 1 got up early one morning and took a photo of her neighborhood in the fog (see figure 7) while a student in Class 2 spent an afternoon taking photos in a cemetery (see figure 8). A student in Class 3 asked her roommate to pose for a photo, capturing a complex image that showcases the intersections of identity, the body, gender, education, and career aspirations (see figure 9). During a period of unrest due to the pandemic, racial injustices, and political turmoil, images like this one proliferated to encourage viewers to question perceptions of race, gender, and class; as Dada and Surrealist work also made clear, art can be a powerful tool for social activism and advocacy.

While some students provided a straightforward explanation of their photograph, describing for example how the various elements of the image came together to create meaning, others approached the essay in a more creative way. The student who took the photograph in figure 7 from Class 1 wrote her essay as a narrative from the perspective of the person who can be seen off in the distance. Looking at the photograph, one can see the figure of a person barely visible through fog; while the image itself is interesting, viewing it alongside the narrative creates tensions and provides new meaning. Like Dada and Surrealist work, the elements are not separate, but work together to tell a story that wouldn't be possible with only one of the components. The student wrote the following as the introductory paragraph of her analysis:

> I exist in this valley of heartache, isolated and alone. This world is cold, unfeeling, and colorless. I have been walking without rest for many years, yet I know that I cannot stop moving forward. There is an unseen voice pushing me to continue for one more day, telling me that the fog may clear and the colors could return. Trudging, I hunch my shoulders to try and keep warm but the dampness seeps in. I call out, aching to hear another human's voice, but the only response is the slow sound of my footsteps on this dirty, broken road.

Later, after the narrative, the student provided a bit of context for her approach:

> The photo is grey and colorless, which means that the man cannot see any happiness or beauty around him. He has become lost in his own misery. . . This unnamed man is searching for another person to bring him comfort but no one ever responds to his cries. The cars represent the help that is offered but he is too overwhelmed to see or accept. He sees no way out, and no effort is worth making anymore. In our society, everyone is wrapped up in their own problems that they sometimes fail to notice the person beside them who is also struggling.

Not only did the student analyze her photograph, but she also provided background information on her approach. The transgenre nature of the assignment allowed the student to approach it creatively and critically; she was able to tell a story while also articulating her rhetorical choices. To her, the image represented a lack of human connection in society, and she broke down each element of the photograph to show how it conveyed that meaning. This meaning she pulled from the image is not inherently communicated through the photograph; rather, she established this meaning through in-depth analysis and creative-critical thinking.

Other students reflected on the assignment differently, noting how taking the photograph and analyzing it allowed them to gain fresh perspective and think about images in a more critical way. In her conclusion, a student from Class 1 wrote that analyzing the photograph helped her to consider and think critically about things she wouldn't normally notice. She wrote, "We are taking the little details and things from life for granted without questioning, because we have turned into machines that only know how to do what is asked of us, but we don't have the capacity of getting out of our minds and put our obstacle aside and acknowledge the beauty of the world we live in." In the process of analyzing and writing about her image—a sunset through a car window—this student was able to think about a seemingly simple landscape in a new way. While we are bombarded by images every day, students (and especially basic writers) don't always understand that visuals have the ability to communicate and convey arguments. The assignment helped this student to understand the meaning created by art and gave her an opportunity to create meaning in her own way through intersecting visual art and writing. This awareness can be applied to various

Figure 6. One photograph used in class to practice analyzing a visual.

Figure 7. A student photograph of a figure in the fog.

Figure 8. A student photograph of a local cemetery.

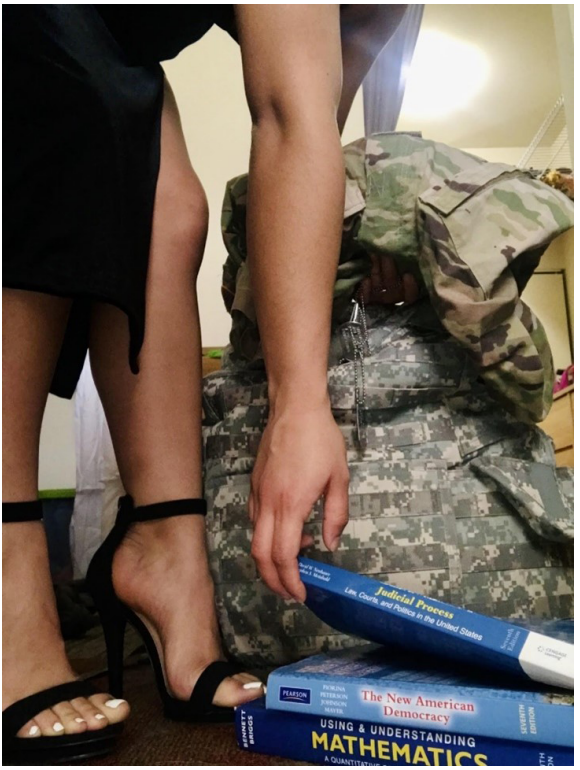

Figure 9. A student photograph of her roommate's intersecting identities.

rhetorical situations as transfer as the student noted in her reflection; she doesn't want to just accept what she sees at face value, but rather wants to consider the messages that are being conveyed through media.

Another student from Class 1 wrote that the assignment helped her think about art, interpretation, and individual perspective in new ways, noting that "every person will have a different way of how they interpret the same picture, but that is the beauty of art. There is no wrong or right answer when it comes to analyzing a work of art. For me, [this photograph, an image of a pink, orange, purple, and blue sky] was about taking the time to learn how to see the good in all of my struggles and not be blinded by problems I face in my life." Here, the student articulates how art helps us to approach problems creatively and critically and that everyone has unique identities and experiences that will impact how they create and interpret, emphasizing that everyone can be an artist (or writer) and create art. Through shooting and analyzing her photograph, this student was able to see the power of art and how creative-critical thinking can teach us to be open to what images are communicating.

Negotiations and Limitations

While a transgenre approach creates unique opportunities for basic writers, I am keenly aware of the challenges such an approach can present. In my experience, most students aren't enthusiastic about taking Basic Writing; as Peele and Antinori point out, many feel "academically marginalized" and have been told that they aren't "good writers" (29). Understandably, this has caused basic writing students to lack confidence in their abilities and, as a result, it can be difficult to bring a new approach into these classroom spaces. In implementing this transgenre approach, I desired to give students as much ownership over their work as possible, encouraging them to write about subjects they were interested in or that were tied to their identities and/or experiences. In doing so, I aimed to increase student investment and enthusiasm toward the work in the class. However, it's important to show patience and understanding when bringing a new approach into Basic Writing classrooms; instructors should acknowledge that many basic writers have had negative experiences in writing classes in the past and may require more guidance with non-traditional assignments.

I also want to emphasize that the study results are based on my observations. Students weren't directly interviewed, so the results highlighted are from my own research journal and are a combination of direct observations

and excerpts from student work. I approached the study in this way for a couple reasons: One, reflection was an element already built into the assignments and, two, I wanted to give students space to be flexible and take risks. I felt that students would be more willing to exercise creativity and flexibility without the "threat" of having to justify their assignment approach to me in a face-to-face interview after completing the project. Because creating and sharing art can be a vulnerable process, I wanted to honor students' openness and creativity. While these reasons informed my approach, I recognize the limitations of filtering student interactions and assignments through my own observational lens. In addition, the sample for this study includes three courses, all facilitated at USI, with approximately twenty students in each course. As mentioned, the students were predominantly white, women, and from the state of Indiana. These factors further limit the results as they don't illustrate a diverse range of perspectives.

Another important consideration is that Class 3 was interrupted and moved online mid-semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is not representative of a typical in-person, full-semester course. In addition to the quick shift to online learning and coping with a global pandemic, Class 3 faced other obstacles: Most of the students were in the class because they had failed Basic Writing the previous semester, and they were being asked to embrace a new, arts-based approach. Despite the many difficulties Class 3 endured, and although many students in the class failed because of these difficulties, I saw clear attempts to embrace creativity through their art-making and writing. I was most impressed by the photographs students took for the analytical essay as many of the images represented beauty and an escape: images of lakes and streams, of people playing music, of family taking walks and enjoying time outdoors, of pets and favorite pastimes. Even with the chaos of the pandemic, they were still able to capture and share the parts of their lives that provided safety and stability. Class 3 reminded me of the importance of an embodied, compassionate pedagogy that allows for students to ask questions, take risks, and be creative. In the best of times, transgenre composing can help basic writers find unique ways to bring their interests and identities into their work. It can encourage a deeper understanding of transfer and provide students with a creative outlet for self-expression. In times of crisis, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, art-making provides an outlet for escape, a way to imagine a reality different than our own.

Today's Context: Further Reflection on the Current Moment

Through transgenre composing, we see the lived experiences of others and what it can look like to live "queerly" (i.e., outside the confines of societal expectations within and beyond the academy). Furthering notions in "Courting the Peculiar" that position creative non-fiction as a genre transcending boundaries and binaries, Hawkins' recent transgenre book, *These are Love(d) Letters*, brings together elements of image and text. The book explores the concept of the love letter while specifically focusing on letters Hawkins' father wrote to their mother in the 1960s. Like much of Hawkins' other work, *These are Love(d) Letters* provides reader-viewers with moments to think critically about the possibilities of artistic expression and writing. Like Dada and Surrealist artists, Hawkins blends materials and genres, creating space for alternative ways of creating and imagining. In sharing stories of their own life and grappling with complex subjects like gender and identity, the work is vulnerable and approachable. And, as Dada and Surrealist artists and writers conveyed, the ability to find escape and express oneself through art is especially important during difficult times, and our current moment has only further illuminated this.

Even though Class 3 was not a "normal" Basic Writing course because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I still included it as a case study because I think it provides insight into the chaos experienced by Dada and Surrealist artists in the 1910s and 20s and what prompted them to create in the first place. The Spring 2020 semester brought the start of the COVID-19 pandemic alongside political and racial tensions in the United States. The pandemic and these tensions (combined with mandatory quarantine, the transition to virtual learning, and a loss of social and community connections) contributed to an overwhelming sense of isolation. However, people were still able to seek out moments of creativity to wrestle with the fear and uncertainty. Students in Class 3 kept moving forward with their assignments, engaging in art-making alongside writing. On social media, videos surfaced depicting immense creativity as people found new ways to make, connect, and regain a sense of stability. There were individuals who recreated famous works of art, made intricate and beautiful drawings on Etch A Sketches, experimented with bread-making, and created art with food, sticky notes, and many other materials (including toilet paper, a resource that was difficult to come by).

I think the Dada and Surrealist artists would be excited to see how a transgenre approach continues to help humans cope with and heal from the uncertainties of life. The creativity we pursued and experienced during

the COVID-19 pandemic was a necessary medicine; we turn to the arts and entertainment to distract from the world around us, to see alternative perspectives, and to experience life through a different lens. In the same way, creating is therapeutic; we become grounded, can connect with our subjects and with others more intimately, and can work through the complex feelings and emotions associated with day-to-day life, especially during a period of worldwide upheaval. In a time when the arts and humanities are consistently being devalued, it's important to remember how urgently we need art. I take this reminder with me as a new semester is just a few weeks away; we are still navigating continued concerns surrounding the pandemic, including the development of COVID-19 variants. With a true return to "normal" still in the distance, basic writers, and all students, need patience and compassion, reminders that their identities matter and that their instructors care, and time for creative exploration to distract from the stresses of day-to-day life and the current moment.

Works Cited

Alexander, Jonathan, and Jacqueline Rhodes. *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies*. NCTE, 2014.

Bradley, Fiona. *Surrealism*. Cambridge UP, 1997.

Balzotti, Jon. "Storyboarding for Invention: Layering Modes for More Effective Transfer in a Multimodal Composition Classroom." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 35, no.1, 2016, pp. 63-84.

Buell, Marcia Z. "It's Not Just About the Teaching: Integrating Basic Writing History and Theory in a Master's Level Graduate Seminar." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2018, pp. 92-119.

Hawkins, Ames. "Exhuming Transgenre Ties." *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, vol. 21, 2016. http://enculturation.net/21.

---. "Re: Checking in from BGSU – Kristin LaFollette Dissertation Project." Message to Kristin LaFollette. 11 April 2017. Email.

Hawkins, Ames, Barrie Jean Borich, K. Bradford, and Mary Cappello. "Courting the Peculiar: The Ever-Changing Queerness of Creative Nonfiction." *Slag Glass City*, vol. 1, 2014. http://www.slagglasscity.org/essaymemoirlyric/textual/courting-peculiar-ever-changing-queerness-creative-nonfiction.

Henry, Thomas, Joshua Hilst, and Regina Clemens Fox. "Remembering Basic Composition: The Emergence of Multimodality in Basic Writing Studies." *Basic Writing e-Journal*, vol. 10/11, no. 1, 2011/2012, pp. 1-18.

Hopkins, David. *Dadaism and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2004.

Komlos, Barbara Z. "'That's Me on a Horse of Many Colors': Native American College Students' Self-Portraits as Academic Writers." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2019, pp. 64-105.

Murray, Joddy. "Composing Multimodality." *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Claire Lutkewitte, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014, pp. 325-50.

Palmeri, Jason. *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*. Southern Illinois UP, 2012.

Peele, Thomas, and Melissa Antinori. "iBooks Portfolios: Interface, Audiences, and the Making of Online Identities." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2013, pp. 28-50.

Rubino, Vittoria. "The Artistry of Composition." *Exquisite Corpse: Studio Art-Based Writing in the Academy*, edited by Kate Hanzalik and Nathalie Virgintino, Parlor Press, 2019, pp. 125-48.

Selfe, Cynthia L. "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2009, pp. 616-63.

Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011.

Sirc, Geoffrey. "Box-Logic." *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*, edited by Anne Frances Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc, Utah State UP, 2004, pp. 111-46.

Wysocki, Anne Frances. "The Multiple Media of Texts: How Onscreen and Paper Texts Incorporate Words, Images, and Other Media." *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analysis of Text and Textual Practices*, edited by Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior. Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 2003, pp. 123-63.