

Improving Multimodal Assignments through Collaborative Reflection/Revision

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Abstract

Multimodal assignments, while dismissed by some as “creative,” are becoming more widely accepted in college composition classrooms. In fall 2016, Wichita State University assigned a multimodal assignment in English 101 for the first time. This essay traces the revision and remaking of this multimodal assignment, reviewing the purposes of multimodal assignments and the benefits of a reflective and collaborative pedagogical practice.

Keywords

multimodal, creative, composition, revision, reflection, collaboration

In fall 2016, all English 101 instructors at Wichita State University (WSU), for the first time in the composition program’s history, assigned a multimodal assignment. In many universities across the nation, composition programs are more frequently assigning multimodal tasks, despite some continued resistance to “creative” assignments.

Instructors at WSU designed this first multimodal to help students navigate rhetorical situations and understand how various modalities work together to form cohesive messages. The assignment instructed students to select between several options: creating a graphic novel, composing a soundtrack to a novel of choice, creating or curating a photo essay, producing an infographic, or revising a previous essay into a new genre. Each option also came with a unique topic for students on which focus their product. The final product, regardless of which option students selected, was to include five pages worth of work. The assignment included a rubric covering the six traits of writing – ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, fluency, and conventions. This rubric aligned with the rubrics given for all other major assignments in the 101 course.

The fact that this was the university’s first semester implementing such an assignment seemed unique. I’d taught multimodal assignments before during my time in the secondary classroom but had seldom come across such an assignment in my post-secondary experience. I was curious to see how this assignment would be received, and then potentially improved. With the approval of the writing director, I decided to collect reflections on the assignment from multiple sources after its completion. My original goal was to understand how the assignment had been received, and then make suggestions to the writing director for possible improvements.

Student Experiences and Feedback

I received feedback from students in both a class discussion and in an informal reflective survey. In their verbal responses, some of my students expressed a great deal of excitement over the multimodal assignment. These students were the ones who took the assignment as an opportunity to explore one of their passions within the composition classroom. One such student remixed his previously written compare-contrast essay into a YouTube video he published on his own YouTube channel, a channel already replete with his friends’ humorous exploits. This student loved the assignment, and his excitement was evident within the final product he produced and his comments during the discussion.

However, many other students had a different and less-fulfilling experience. Several students felt like they did not leave the multimodal assignment with any identifiable skills. Many students

complained the prompts felt limiting or confusing. They also complained that the wide variety of prompts made the assignment confusing, and since it seemed some prompts were easier than others, it was hard to gauge what qualified as the required “five pages worth of work” listed in the original assignment. The students also expressed great concern over the grading process. They felt the rubric was mismatched to the assignment, and many of them were concerned their grade would not reflect the effort they put in to the assignment, or conversely that someone who put in far less effort would end up just as successful as they hoped to be. The reflective survey I gave students mirrored these negative sentiments.

As an instructor, receiving this feedback was disappointing, but wholly unsurprising. As we progressed through the unit, I’d sensed the disconnect happening between the purpose of the assignment and the actual experience students were having, but I was not quite sure how to address the issue. I decided that in order to better understand the situation surrounding this assignment, it would be appropriate to seek out feedback from my fellow instructors to gauge whether they had similar experiences in their classrooms.

Instructor Experiences and Feedback

To do this, I emailed an open-ended questionnaire to my fellow graduate teaching assistants. I also held a series of informal interviews with my peers to discuss the pedagogical choices they made during the unit. These responses and discussions showed a strong relationship between the student feedback and the instructors’ feelings. One such point of intersection between student and instructor feedback was the prompts. Several of the instructors felt the prompts were either too varied or too limited and therefore made changes to the prompts in their classrooms. Many of the instructors broadened the expectations, allowing students to write about any content they chose. One instructor posed the prompts to students but then said students could have more freedom with content and modalities per teacher permission. He explained: “So, in essence, I went for the vague and open-ended route. I feel strongly that the students who got into the assignment were allowed more room to push their final projects; and that those who were just going to blow it off anyway, did that” (Ethington, personal communication, November 29, 2016). In contrast to this, another instructor, proceeded in the opposite direction and limited the student’s prompts to only two prompt options. I think this varied response to the prompt by instructors indicates again a disconnect between of the assignment and the purpose of the assignment. While the instructors were all able to grasp the purpose of incorporating a multimodal assignment in the composition classroom, it seemed many of them lost sight of that purpose in its implementation. I include myself in this assessment. As I taught this multimodal unit, I frequently lost sight of the goal of multimodal assignments, and instead just tried to teach “graphic novels” or “infographics” rather than lessons targeted to the development of transferrable skills.

Reflecting on the experiences of my peer-instructors and my students, I concluded the multimodal assignment should be revised. My primary goal in my revision was to reconnect the assignment itself to the original purposes that scholars have discussed as reasons to include multimodal and creative assignments in the composition classroom. In Tracy Bowen and Carl Whithous’ (2013) introduction to *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* they discuss what they believe to be a purpose to multimodal assignments: “The contributors [to this volume] consider how understandings of genre and media can be used in classrooms to help facilitate students’ development as writers able to work across modes and across genres” (p. 3). Simply put, the authors in this volume believe negotiating new genres will improve student writing abilities because they will have a higher level of understanding of genre. Students who understand genre and how genres are selected due to rhetorical situations will likely be able to better express themselves because they understand rhetorical purpose. Any instructor who has struggled to help students transition their

writing style from a narrative to a formal argument essay can appreciate how important it is for students to understand rhetorical situations and genre.

Some scholars support this purpose and extend it. Jody Shipka's (2011) *Towards a Composition Made Whole* argues for a paradigm shift in accepting multiple genres and mediums as a natural part of the composition process. She points out several purposes behind the multimodal approach, such as, developing a "more richly nuanced views of literacy," and these assignments and new framework provide us with opportunities to "remediate our actions by changing our tools and the way we share them with others" (p. 1064). Following Shipka's model, multimodal assignments develop a student's thoughtfulness and reflective nature in order that they might "remediate" their actions. These are some of the skills my students missed in their multimodal experiences—that reflective skills are transferable and extend to all aspects of the composition classroom. Students who are reflective and can make conscious composition choices during a multimodal assignment can make conscious choices while writing an essay. These same students can use these newly acquired skills of reflection to make a better presentation for their history class or write a better proposal in an entrepreneurial business class. Taking these scholarly opinions together, multimodal assignments are given to craft more compositionally conscious students, and the design of these assignment should mirror this.

Revising the Multimodal Assignment

With these purposes in mind and with permission and approval from the writing director who created the original multimodal assignment, I began the revision process in spring 2017. I wanted the assignment I designed to improve student writing, refine their reflective skills, and facilitate a creative exchange. I also kept in mind goals discussed in the New London Group's (1996) landmark article "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," which first discussed how incorporating multiple literacies in the composition classroom can prepare students for a global economy that demands flexibility from its workers, and how these same multiliteracies give voice to those who previously have been denied representation. Finally, I also wanted the revised assignment to result in more positive responses from both students and instructor feedback. I wanted students to feel more engaged throughout the process and to be able to define the skills they gained from the activity.

I first chose to focus on student choice and transitioning the original multimodal assignment from a very strict model, with the mediums and topics already tied together, to a more open model where the students could pair topics and mediums based on their creative intuition. However, I did not want to leave the assignment completely open to student choice. While many scholars develop very open-ended multimodal assignments with almost no guidelines, I was concerned that with such an assignment, students would feel overwhelmed by the idea of having to pick both a topic and medium from the vast sea of options. Additionally, I thought so many options would be particularly daunting for English 101 students, as for many of them, this would be their first encounter with such an assignment on a collegiate level. I also thought assignments with such little guidance place certain groups of students, such as first-generation college students or returning non-traditional students, at a disadvantage. These students who had not operated in collegiate academic spaces before, or not for several years, might not be equipped to meet the unspoken demands of the academic environment. So, I instead decided to provide options for students to choose from. I view these options as a boxing ring, providing a set space for students to enter and wrestle with their rhetorical choices.

To create this balance between maximizing student choice and providing space to explore, I chose to separate the topics and mediums the original multimodal assignment had paired together. I provided students with two lists – one with specific potential topics, and the other with potential mediums. It was important to allow students to select which medium would be best suited to their

topic to fulfill the purposes of the assignment. The pairing of topic to medium helps students to better understand genre, as mentioned by Bowen and Whithous (2013). For example, students who select the recent tobacco-free campaign on Wichita State University's campus, must consider what stance they are taking on the topic, and to whom they are appealing. After these considerations, students would then determine what genre their project best fits, choose an appropriate medium, and perhaps apply a similar process in their creative endeavors in the future.

I included a diverse list of possible mediums. I did not want to fall into the problem of limiting students to only technology-based mediums, because far too many instructors equate multimodal to technological, which defeats the purpose of students authentically analyzing rhetorical situations. The mediums offered varied from heavily technology-dependent options such as film and infographics, to totally non-technology-based options such as a live performance. Such options could potentially be adapted to multiple genres and topics, leaving the space for students to adapt their projects according to their creative aspirations.

Providing student choice by separating topic and medium was an important step in my revision, but there were other elements I felt should be added to the assignment. Shipka (2011) argues "that students who are required to produce 'precisely defined goal statements' for their work become increasingly cognizant of how texts are comprised of a series of rhetorical, technological, and methodological 'moves' that, taken together, simultaneously afford and constrain potentials for engaging with those texts" (p. 2017). She believes students who produce "goal statements" will become more "cognizant" of their creative moves and will hopefully result in more successful final products since students can produce with the end in mind. In my revised assignment, proposals served as these goal statements. I left the instructions of the proposal open to instructor interpretation, but the presence of a proposal was essential. The presence of a proposal was an opportunity for instructors to create authenticity in their work, as instructors could ask students to mirror their proposals from a real-life example such as a business or grant proposal.

In addition to a proposal, a reflection was another essential element in successfully accomplishing the goals of the assignment. In his 2013 article "Back to the Future? The Pedagogical Promise of the (Multimedia) Essay," Erik Ellis discusses reflective essays and decides these essays should be "embodiments of their thinking that enable readers to experience their ideas as they have unfolded over time" (p. 52). The value of this "embodiment" of students' thought processes lies in the connections students will make between their creative compositional process and the goals of the assignment, and of course demonstrate an understanding of those connections to the instructor. The reflection gives the student a valuable time to better understand concepts such as genre, audience, and skills to be derived from the assignment. The reflection gives the instructor something written not only to grade, but also to gauge whether the instructional practices and assignment has met its goal.

The reflection I assigned in the multimodal project was largely left open to instructor interpretation. Ideally, the instructors took the reflection and assigned it as a formal written element to the multimodal assignment. In the assignment instructions, I did communicate some of the purposes behind the reflection by stating, "You could be asked to explain choices of selection and composition. You might also be asked to reflect on skills you developed and how the skills you use translate to other areas of composition or other fields." These statements were designed to encourage both instructors and students to make their reflections meaningful and not just informal afterthoughts to the assignment. However, the reflection is designed to still be secondary to the final multimodal product. In her chapter of *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, Cheryl Ball (2013) discusses an assignment where too much emphasis was placed on the reflection: "This is not an assignment I have chosen to repeat because most students' discussions of their literacy practices were demonstrated better in the written design justification than in the final texts, and that runs

counter to my purpose in teaching multimodal composition practices” (p. 26). Ball shows that sometimes the reflection can usurp the multimodal assignment itself and is problematic. The final multimodal product should reflect the effort described in the students’ reflections. If the reflection discusses a level of comprehension or skill that was obviously not replicated in the final product, then the student has likely not fulfilled the intended goals of the assignment. To prevent this from happening with my assignment, I encouraged instructors to define the percentage of the grade the reflection and proposal would have when first giving the assignment. In further revisions of the assignment, and adaptations in other settings, I created a separate rubric for the reflection that showed its value in comparison to the multimodal final product.

The rubric was the last revised component. The grading process was one of the most complained about components of the multimodal assignment from both instructors and students in the first semester of fall 2016. Both students and instructors struggled to adapt the given rubric to the assignment at hand. Grading multimodal assignments is frequently problematic because the final products are so varied, and by nature some mediums require greater effort than others. For example, a student in my first semester made a film adaptation of an essay he had previously written in class. In his reflection, he discussed the many steps he’d taken to complete the project. He had written a script, cajoled friends to volunteer to help, organized those friends, filmed the scene, played a part in the film himself, and then edited the entire project. His multimodal assignment took him a great deal of time and effort. In contrast, a fellow student in the same class produced an infographic about endangered animals. This student used Piktochart, an infographic generation website, and in her reflection admitted to spending only a few hours on the entire project. Both projects fulfilled the requirements, and both projects received an “A.” But as I was grading, I felt a twinge of conflict as I felt the first student deserved more than just an “A” for his above-average effort. This enters a difficult zone of grading theory in general – should the product outweigh the effort? Or the reverse?

To address this, in my second semester of teaching English 101 – and in the middle of my revision process – I decided to discuss the grading issue directly with my students. Two class periods into the multimodal unit, I held a discussion with my class about the nature of the multimodal assignment and the grading process. While we acknowledged departmental requirements meant I as the instructor had to adhere to the original rubric, we decided to come up with our own alternate rubric that would better help guide both the students in their creation process, and myself in the grading process. As a class we created a rubric with the following categories: Message/Purpose, Organization, Production Value, and Written Mechanics. We also distributed the points according to which categories we found to be the most important. We then took the rubric we created and discussed how it could be adapted to the original rubric. After this exercise, we viewed example projects and graded them as a class using both rubrics so our ideas of success were aligned. This exercise alone resulted in a dramatic improvement in the responses from students about grading. After the assignment, students expressed that because of this activity, they felt like even though the rubric might not have aligned with their ideal grading situation, they were able to understand what to expect and better focus their efforts on what mattered most.

I also benefitted a great deal from this lesson as it guided me in my revisions of the current rubric. While I considered briefly attempting to convince the writing director to abandon a rubric all together, the value of a rubric is still significant in terms of alignment between instructors. Holistic grading is unrealistic in terms of most writing programs who seek for some level of consistency among first-year composition courses. Additionally, the writing director decided he wanted the rubric to remain consistent with the other assignments which were organized by six traits of writing. I therefore created a rubric divided into the same six writing traits, but with each trait separated into two categories: one that defines the categories in terms of the written components (the reflection and proposal), and one that defines the categories in terms of a multimodal assignment. Of the

adaptations I made, the one I felt was most effective was using my students' idea of "Production Value" to add some element that could gauge the efforts of the students who used particularly difficult mediums to communicate their message. This "Production Value" category evaluated students on the quality of the final product and acknowledged the different levels of effort required by different mediums. Overall, the revised rubric would better guide both students in their development process and instructors in the grading process of diverse products.

The revisions made to the multimodal assignment were published and implemented in the fall 2017 semester, one year after Wichita State's first attempt at implementing a multimodal assignment. Individually, as with most graduate students, my teaching circumstances were dramatically different from one semester to the next. In fall 2017, I taught two sections of online English 101. The revised multimodal assignment was implemented online as well, and while I saw some positive shifts in the assignment, I felt gathering information from my peers in face-to-face courses would be important to grasping a non-biased opinion on the effects of the revisions. Most of the instructors for English 101 were first-year graduate students who had as little experience with the multimodal assignment as the previous year's instructors

The Revised Multimodal Assignment: Instructor Experiences and Feedback

I sent the English 101 instructors from fall 2017 the same optional, open-ended email of questions I had sent to my peers the previous year. Overall, the instructor feedback was positive. Where as in the previous year, instructors expressed a level of discomfort and displeasure with the multimodal unit, instructors from fall 2017 expressed satisfaction towards the assignment. Most instructors felt their students were successful in their efforts and the unit had an important purpose in the classroom. One instructor stated:

Perhaps the greatest benefit I could see from teaching the Multimodal Unit was the inclusiveness towards first generation and minority college students. Many of my students chose their own family heritage, culture, or origin for their "thesis" for their final project. I also liked that this format allowed my students who struggled with writing to really soar to great heights of achievement by expressing their thesis in something other than purely alphabetic text. (Yenser, personal communication, January 11, 2018)

This effect of reaching marginalized students is one of the most important effects of a multimodal unit and demonstrates this assignment helped to reach the identified goals of my assignment which aligned with the goals of the New London Group (1996) when they first called for the revolutionizing of the compositional world in their landmark publication.

Another instructor, who had the rare opportunity of teaching English 101 face-to-face two semesters in a row, also discussed her positive experience with the revised multimodal assignment, focusing on the proposal element. She stated:

I think the most helpful addition to the multimodal assignment was adding a proposal. This gave me a chance to show students how to structure a proposal and screen some of their ideas, but it also gave students a chance to really think about the purpose of their project. A lot of the students I had last semester were happy with creating a multimodal project, but many of them fell short because they didn't have a clear purpose. With the proposal, students were required to think about why they were creating an infographic on tobacco use on campus, rather than just throwing one together for the sake of meeting assignment requirements. (Stewart, personal communication, January 10, 2018)

This instructor's feedback indicates not only the significance of the proposal but also of how the revised multimodal assignment enabled students to consider elements such as purpose, which would lead them to be more reflective in their rhetorical choices. Honing this reflective ability was one of my primary goals of the assignment, and this feedback from the instructor demonstrates this was, in some ways, accomplished.

Finally, another instructor reported the positive experience he felt was cultivated in his classroom because of the multimodal unit:

Most of the projects I received were pretty great; I stressed the effort and compositional elements over the written elements of this essay and they seemed to react positively. I allowed them to set their projects up in a World's Fair-style exhibition and they enjoyed having a day to show off their work and to enjoy everyone else's work. (Parker, personal communication, January 11, 2018)

This response indicates a few things about the assignment. First, the instructor notes students reacted positively to his emphasis of compositional efforts rather than written efforts. This positive reaction is hopefully a reflection of the students' enjoyment of the ability to engage in the creative process. Students in this revised assignment took parts of themselves and their surrounding socioculture and engaged with it in a meaningful way without limiting their experiences to the written word. I believe this positive reaction is an indication of students' satisfaction at being able to express themselves in a more honest and creative manner. Additionally, this instructor's feedback hits on another unintended benefit of the multimodal assignment. The instructor stated his students enjoyed sharing their work with their peers in a "World's Fair-style exhibition." The students enjoyed participating and engaging socially within the classroom, and points to multimodal assignments could increase student engagement and activity within the composition classroom.

I am inclined to believe such a link exists because of my own experience with the multimodal assignment. In spring 2017, while in the midst of my revision process, I ended up incorporating some elements my assignment revision, such as opening up the assignment by allowing students to select the topic and pair it with whatever medium they preferred. My class that semester was an eight-week session with only seven students. We met twice a week for two hours and forty-five minutes. The class had been a struggle, as most of the students were quiet and from dramatically different walks of life. However, once the multimodal unit began, my students became vastly more invested in the class. Rather than walking into silence when class began or passing the break period on their phones, my students discussed their multimodal assignments, questioned their rhetorical choices, and critiqued each other's ideas. The unit gave my class an almost "Breakfast Club"-like experience, and by the end of the semester we were all sad for the class to end. This experience, paired with feedback from other instructors such as those listed above, causes me to believe there could be a strong link between a well-designed multimodal assignment, facilitating greater classroom participation and fostering a better classroom environment.

Conclusion

Reflecting on this experience of revising this multimodal assignment, I have come to a few overarching conclusions. First, multimodal assignments are not superfluous in a composition classroom. Instead, multimodal assignments develop students' rhetorical dexterity and highlight the transferable nature of composition skills. Additionally, these assignments can dramatically increase student engagement. Therefore, multimodal assignments are essential to a successful composition course.

I have also concluded that multimodal assignments are most successful when they remain connected to their purposes. Teachers can ensure this connectivity by maximizing student choice, including proposals and reflection requirements, and having clear grading guidelines. I have used these guidelines in developing multimodal assignments in future courses since fall 2017 and have seen the beneficial outcomes repeated several times.

In addition to these conclusions, I have also been reminded through this revision process the importance of a reflection and collaboration in any pedagogical practice. The original multimodal assignment produced by the writing director was excellent. It inspired creativity and brought new life to the English 101 courses at WSU. My reflection and revision improved upon the original experience and that process has continued in each subsequent semester. The revisions I made were based upon student and instructor feedback. I collaborated with my peers and students to make my practice better, and it benefitted my future students far more than I originally anticipated. Often, teachers are considered islands. As a first-semester graduate student, I had the unique opportunity to collaborate every week with my peers in my practicum course. After that semester, my collaboration dramatically decreased, and only happened when I forced engagement through surveys and emails. Since then, as an adjunct professor, it has been a struggle to even find my peers, let alone collaborate with them. However, remembering the benefits I received from collaboration during my multimodal revision, and the countless ways my pedagogical practice has improved since, I continue to seek out opportunities to collaborate with peers, as they are, in the end, my best resource.

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