


Multimodality as a Communicative Tool for Social Engagement and Reform

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Abstract

This article acknowledges the viability of multimodal projects in first-year college-level writing courses in accordance with the evolution of composition pedagogy over the past forty years. Since the 1982 publication of Hairston's article "The Winds of Change" forecasting the end of the then-ubiquitous current-traditional approach, composition pedagogy has undergone paradigm shifts from process to post-process theory and from textual to digital modes of composition. Inspired by Goodwin's (2020) research on students' multimodal responses to local community issues, I developed a public media project for my first-year writing course for which students created media texts addressing local, regional, national, and global issues of their choosing. The project synthesizes the public and interpretative dimensions of writing identified by post-process scholars with elements of multimodality and civic engagement to help students understand how public media texts raise social awareness of current issues and mobilize community efforts toward unified resolution of such issues.

Keywords: post-process movement, digital composition, public media, social awareness, social justice

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Hairston correctly predicted in her seminal 1982 article “The Winds of Change” that pedagogical approaches to writing instruction would undergo a major sea change—that the current traditional paradigm that had dominated writing instruction for much of the twentieth century was about to be replaced (p. 77). The process movement had been gaining strength during the previous decade, with anchoring research by Emig (1971), Murray (1971), Perl (1979), and Sommers (1980) building a case to replace the product-oriented current-traditional paradigm as writing’s primary pedagogical approach. By the mid-1980s, writing instructors had shifted their focus from the finished product to the steps to achieve that product, giving particular emphasis to the prewriting and rewriting stages of composing (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 366) and providing students various methods for moving through each stage while conceptualizing writing as a recursive, non-linear process (Kent, 1999, p. 1).

Post-Process: Writing is/as Social Interaction

Nearly forty years later, these key elements of the process movement still define much of the work we do with our students. We still encourage students to explore their ideas through prewriting, to engage simultaneously in exploring, drafting, and revising as their ideas take shape, and to refine their ideas according to their and their readers’ expectations. Even as we entered the post-process movement in the late 1990s, these elements of the process movement remained a core part of our pedagogy (Kent, 1999, p. 1), providing a sense of structure and direction for students as they composed in various modes of writing.

But, as many composition theorists acknowledged, these elements alone were insufficient for guiding students to understand more fully how their writing’s meaning is socially influenced or interpreted by audiences. Moreover, the three basic components of the process movement’s conceptualization of writing—prewriting, writing

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selection process. I will also encourage students to explore the benefits and drawbacks of converting their documents, if in print form, to digital media, and vice versa. Students who created print-based documents reported in their reflections struggling with limited space for text and imagery. Those who created digital media were concerned about sustaining viewers' interests and vying for their attention amidst thousands of other online texts. Additional opportunities to explore the limitations of these media would likely enhance students' understanding of how their chosen media formats and elements affect their and their audiences' abilities and willingness to engage in meaningful communicative exchanges. Ultimately, however, I am pleased with students' responses to this multimodal unit. Their projects demonstrated creativity and adherence to (and in some cases clever deviation from) media conventions, as well as recognition of how audiences' knowledge of and attitudes towards students' selected issues can be effectively shaped or changed.

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