

Mind the Gap:

Multimodal Communication from Classroom to Career

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Historically, and in my own experience, the world of academia often, yet unintentionally, becomes a secluded realm that is far from portraying the realities and demands of today's workforce. The result is troubling for many new graduates, and I find there to be gaps in both research and pedagogy on how intentional exhibition of multimodal communication can help ease a student's transition into the workforce. Though wrought with false assumptions and anxiety, this gap can be closed starting with a strong command in the troupes of multimodal messaging. The intentional use of multimodality messaging enriches students' education, encourages new ways to interpret messaging, and establishes a helpful skill set in transitioning to and thriving in a student's career.

Understanding and intentionally using multimodality composition and pedagogy is key for the success of future generations. The five modes referenced by the term "multimodal composition" are as follows: linguistic, aural, spatial, visual, and gestural. To clarify, a successful multimodal piece of communication includes two or more modes, utilizes the affordances of its emphasized mode, diminishes the limitations of emphasizing other modes, and produces a message well-suited for its intended audience.

Melanie Gagich, author of peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom entitled, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 3, references research by Cheryl E. Ball and Colin Charlton of The New London Group to further illustrate that "[a]ny combination of modes makes a multimodal text, and all text—every piece of communication a human composes—uses more than one mode. Thus, all writing is multimodal (Gagich, 72).

To distinguish how one might choose to use the multimodal construct, Gagich reminds us that, “one mode receives more emphasis than the others” (Gagich, 72). You, my dear reader, are now digesting this piece of communication I have written. Instead of choosing to present my message as an infographic (thus, emphasizing the visual and spatial modes), I am choosing to emphasize the linguistic mode by delivering my message through alphabetic text. This is arguably the most used mode in academia, however, to only focus on this one mode is to ignore the affordances of using multimodal emphases to empower a message.

Patricia Sullivan, author of *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies*, raises many “questions, issues, and critiques about pedagogies of experimental writing in her peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom entitled, *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 3. Like Sullivan, I agree that students, especially with access to new technologies, “may be better allowed to express their individual experiences, [and] articulate marginal or underrepresented social realities” through multimodal discourse (Sullivan, 147). The intentional use of multimodality messaging encourages new ways to interpret messaging (and, in turn, allows the creation of a message that can be uniquely interpreted).

Specifically, in her fifth chapter, Sullivan presents an essay, “Postscript: Toward a Multimodal Composition,” in which she directly compares multimodal pedagogy to the teaching of experimental writing in the classroom. When discussing the “explosion of scholarship and textbooks about teaching...multimodal composition,” Sullivan references a piece of Cynthia Selfe’s *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers* collection entitled, “The Movement of Air.” Selfe suggests “that the almost exclusive dominance of print literacy works against the interests of individuals and cultures and communities that have managed to maintain a value on multiple modalities of expression, multiple and hybrid ways of knowing, communicating, and establishing identity” (Sullivan, 149). In the forward to *Multimodal Composition*, Selfe “makes

clear how she sees the dependent relation between academic institutions and ‘culture’” (Sullivan, 149). The intentional use of multimodality messaging enriches students’ education.

Just as Sullivan tends to agree with Selfe’s assertions, I also concur with Sullivan’s additional remark from Selfe that there is “a kind of belatedness to composition, whereby society and other disciplines have become multimodal, while composition pedagogy lags behind” (Sullivan, 149). Not only is this concerning but is an eminent danger to future generations as student scholars taught to focus exclusively on emphasizing the linguistic mode transition into a workforce demanding the intricate use of multimodal communication. Selfe asserts that university-level writing pedagogy can “no longer sustain culture behind impenetrable walls of print” and defines “culture” as “the product of human relations” (Sullivan, 149). If this be the case, classroom pedagogy must, not only to reflect modern culture, but also cultivate it. This is imperative in bridging a long-held gap in producing graduating students that are also fully ready to thrive in the workforce. A strong understanding of this is both necessary and invaluable for upperclassmen planning their next steps into the “real world.” Regardless of pedagogy, students need to take the initiative to view their own classwork and experience in school in a way that is more conducive to easing the transition from classroom to career. The intentional use of multimodal messaging establishes a helpful skill set in transitioning to, and thriving in, a student’s career.

Unlike the linguistic written word’s affordance to maintain an unaltered meaning through time and among audiences, a text that emphasizes a different mode may convey its message more clearly based on the author’s intent and the audience’s realm of understanding. Endeavoring to communicate with a full understanding of and the intentional use of multimodal composition is no longer the goal of the overachiever. In today’s job market, these skills are highly sought after and, often, expected. It behooves all students nearing graduation or making

the “classroom to career” transition to take advantage of the multimodal aspects of their assignments.

REFERENCES

Gagich, Melanie. “An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing.” *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 65–83.

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