

S.B. Buckelew

Dr. Robertshaw

EH 554

12 September 2024

Composition Classrooms and Multimodality: Considering Student Collaboration and Material
Contexts

As multimodal composing becomes increasingly prominent in our changing technological world, composition instructors must grapple with what this means for the composition classroom. In her book chapter, "Postscript: Toward a Multimodal Composition," Patricia Sullivan points out that there has been a recent explosion of books on multimodal composition in the classroom, but that many of them simply provide "the means for avoiding the possible instability that multimodal composition might introduce into more conventional print and alphabetic literacy-oriented college writing courses" (151). Sullivan and other scholars argue that multimodal composition requires a different pedagogical approach and that multimodal composition can not be successfully taught by merely extending the traditional composition classroom onto multimodality. As a college composition instructor who currently teaches from a "Writing about Writing" approach, which asks students to take on the role of writing scholars to more deeply explore their writing processes and choices, embracing multimodal composition as part of the composition classroom requires contemplation. I must consider what it means for composition to be not just about writing but about multiple modalities. In this essay, I will explore the perspectives on multimodal composing put forward by Sullivan in her postscript and examine the collaborative work that Dànielle DeVoss and her

students produced in “On Multimodal Composing” to argue for the need that I see for composition teachers to collaborate directly with their students to explore the material contexts that multimodal composing occurs in. I will address specifically the need to look with students at the material contexts of technological spaces, mass culture relationships, and embodied experiences that surround and affect multimodal composing. I will also discuss possible activities that we as composition instructors can utilize to collaborate with our students to explore these material contexts.

We must move into a collaborative relationship with our students because our students will often have different relationships to the important ideas in multimodal composition that we have not even thought of yet. Even in my "Writing About Writing" classroom, my students are already ahead of me in considering multimodal composition as part of composition. In a recent in-class activity where student groups were asked to list everything that they considered to be writing, they considered not just alphanumeric texts but also presentations, graphs, operating system interfaces, Snapchats, and many other multimodal forms of communication. As Sullivan points out in her discussion of her colleagues' desire to reunite art and everyday life through composition, students often have different concerns than scholars on these questions, "maybe that's not an issue for our students, maybe art and everyday life are already entwined for them, just not in ways that Ulmer or Rice or Sirc or I recognize or appreciate; or maybe students are not (rightly) interested in art (an old-fashioned idea if there ever was one). Maybe students recognize that the culture industry and mass culture are more powerful than anything that anyone might try to call "art" (157). If we rely only on our own direction and teaching in the composition classroom, we risk being stuck in outdated frameworks and inhibiting the generative possibilities that come from our students' differing relationships with the world. In "On

Multimodal Composing", DeVoss and her students collectively analyzed the students' multimodal works to "better attend to the multiple, embodied complexities of multimodal composing processes" (Introduction). DeVoss' work with her students illustrates the richness and depth of contextual material inquiry that collaboration with students can bring to the field of multimodal composition.

Both DeVoss et. al and Sullivan cite Anne Wysocki as a critical voice in a shift to a collaborative multimodal classroom based around contextual inquiry. Sullivan quotes Wysocki's insight that "any text—like its composers and readers— doesn't function independently of how it is made and in what contexts"(157). We must recognize that in today's increasingly multimodal world, texts are particularly embedded within contextual situations. Students write, publish, and are surrounded by various technological spaces that affect their work from production to distribution. When students write multimodal texts, they are surrounded by the implications of a mass culture of image and sound. At the same time, students are always moving through reading, writing, and composing in an embodied reality that uniquely interacts with multimodal texts and composing processes.

Multimodal composition often requires that students write and publish within particular technological spaces that support their chosen modalities; how these technological spaces operate then, in turn, influences student's composition. While a student might publish a video on YouTube for the sake of using audio and visual modalities, YouTube is not simply a medium for these modalities. Utilizing YouTube can have unintended contextual consequences; "students and instructors [are] sometimes stuck watching commercials or ads or finding their videos or texts in contexts they hadn't anticipated or desired" (Sullivan 156). For students to be able to consciously work within the context of YouTube and other technologies, it is important to invite

students to analyze the contexts of these platforms and their influence on how they work and the reception of their work. As DeVoss and her students point out, "As we write ourselves into scholarship on composing with new media, it is imperative that we consider not only how we compose with digital tools, but also how digital tools compose us, our field, our students" (The Tools). DeVoss and her students ended their work in "On Multimodal Composing" with a list of all the tools utilized in the production of their multimodal compositions and analysis. DeVoss and her students found it important to be transparent about the tools they utilized because these tools are contextually important to the pieces that they are used to produce. Multimodal composition teachers could have students list all the tools that they utilized during a particular class project or even list all of the different composing technologies and tools that they utilized within a week. Teachers and students could then collaboratively discuss the influences that these tools had on what the students composed.

Mass culture is another important aspect of the material context of multimodal composing that is important to analyze collaboratively with students. As Sullivan points out, "much of multimedia composition relies on, or engages, texts and objects of mass culture made possible by technology"(155). Mass culture creates an embedded language of symbols and aesthetics that can consciously or unconsciously build shared meaning. For students to consciously utilize mass culture for meaning in the creation of multimodal texts, it must be collectively and collaboratively analyzed in the multimodal classroom. DeVoss and her students also found in their analysis of their composing practices that, "Composing revolves around influences, collaborations, and intertextual reciprocities"(Analysis). Composing never occurs in a vacuum but in a multimodal technological mass culture, multimodal compositions are particularly influenced by other works. The context of mass culture to multimodal writing brings

“unanswered questions about the effects of mass culture (not just popular culture) on writing and the complex interrelationships among technology, mass culture, and economic interests” (Sullivan 156). Sullivan describes an activity that Wysocki did with her students to begin analysis of multimodal writings' relationship to mass culture. Wysocki asked her students to look at an advertisement in an issue of the New Yorker and “consider what they value in certain designs and reflect on how aesthetic legacies can contribute to what we can and can't see or can or can't value in particular designs” (Sullivan 158). Composition teachers can collaborate with their students to understand the context of mass culture on multimodal composition by considering with students what histories they bring to a particular multimodal text and how this affects their reading of this text or have students bring their own examples of texts that can be analyzed collectively for patterns.

The body itself cannot be forgotten as an essential context to multimodal composition. The technology of multimodal composition and the ever-increasing digital space and world can make us forget to consider the constant context of our bodies as factors in composition. When I talk about the composition process with my students, the demands of the body always inevitably come up. The body's need for food, for sleep, for quiet, for stimulation are constant factors for my students. "Mediating bodies are mediated bodies. We are always constructed and operating at the tension between being our bodies and being in our bodies, with the press of culture and institutions against us" (DeVoss Introduction). To explore this embodied context of multimodal composition, DeVoss students captured their composing processes on film and then edited these captures into videos that ruminated on the contexts surrounding their composing processes. These recordings of their composing processes brought to light the presence of their bodies, the spaces that their bodies were in, and the interruptions of the demands of their bodies on the

composing process. Multimodal composition teachers seeking to explore the context of embodiment on multimodal composition may look to similar activities that ask students to note or record the state of the body during processes of composition and to analyze these notes both individually and collectively to better understand the embodied context on multimodal composition.

We cannot be complacent in taking on multimodal composition in the classroom. We must understand alongside our students the contextual material realities that multimodal composition always occurs within and bumps up against. "Maybe we need to stop wishing that technology were inherently progressive or that art was a locus of freedom, personal expression, or liberal politics for our students" (Sullivan 159). We cannot count on multimodality or new technologies to move the classroom forward. To have an inclusive, thoughtful multimodal composition classroom, we must understand both the affordances and limits that arise from the contexts that multimodal composing occurs in. DeVoss and her students worked to join the conversation on "what multimodal composition is and can be" (Introduction). We cannot understand what multimodal composition is or its possibilities unless we understand the material contexts that multimodal composition occurs in and we cannot understand these material contexts alone we must join with our students to collectively create a fuller, more robust understanding of the possibilities of multimodal composition.

Works Cited

DeVoss, Dànielle Nicole et. al. "On Multimodal Composing." *Kairos*, *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 15 Jan. 2017, <https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/21.2/praxis/devoss-et-al/introduction.html>.

Sullivan, Patricia Suzanne. "Postscript: Toward a Multimodal Composition." *Experimental Writing in Composition: Aesthetics and Pedagogies*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. Jstor. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkdkr.9>