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Laying the Groundwork: Preparing Students to Understand Multimodality

Multimodality is an integral part of both writing and writing studies. As such, many aim to understand multimodal processes, particularly in an academic setting, and join the conversation on all that multimodal composing encompasses. Melanie Gagich's "An Introduction to and Strategies for Multimodal Composing" is meant to be used as a tool for integrating multimodality into first-year composition, as she presents potential strategies for pre-drafting steps of the composition process. In contrast, Dànielle Nicole DeVoss et al.'s *On Multimodal Composing* shares the process and results of a graduate-level course. DeVoss and her students compile their individual processes, analyze them for trends, and use their findings to join the conversation on multimodal composing processes. Each piece presents a unique view of multimodal discussion or use in an academic setting, representing both the instructor and student. This paper aims to situate these works in conversation with one another, illustrating a problem to be solved and the potential outcome if done correctly. In doing so, the judgement is made that to prepare first-year students for the understanding of multimodality we hope for them to gain, instructors must lay the groundwork by introducing the basic terms and vocabulary associated with multimodality in those first-year classrooms.

From the instructor perspective, Gagich provides explanations for multimodal composing, the five semiotic modes of communication, and potential strategies for the pre-drafting steps in creating a multimodal text. While all the information presented is significant in gaining an understanding of multimodality, the overview of her work and the motive for her writing may be the most significant part as she presents an issue with multimodality within first-year composition courses. From the perspective of a first-year instructor, Gagich explains her experience with students and their existing knowledge of multimodality:

. . . I have encountered many questions and confusion related to multimodal composing, or what is sometimes referred to as “multimodality.” While some students are thrilled to compose something other than an academic essay, others struggle to understand why they are required to create a multimodal text in a writing class. I assure my students that although they may not be familiar with the concept of multimodality, it has a long history in composition (e.g. writing studies). (66)

The long history Gagich references highlights the concern of how and why students enter first-year classrooms without having ever heard the term “multimodal.” Gagich tries to frame this experience from the students’ perspective as she walks through the potential thought process of a first day, syllabus, and recognition of the requirement to create a multimodal text (65). In doing so, the prior experience most students have with the term “multimodal” is noted:

You may wonder to yourself, “What does multimodal mean?” Perhaps you remember an assignment from high school when your teacher required you to create a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation, and she referred to it as a “multimodal project,” but you were not exactly sure what that meant. Or perhaps you only remember writing five paragraph essays in high school and have never heard or read the word “multimodal.” (Gagich 65-66)

This student perspective complicates the issue as the students’ varying knowledge of the terms, or multimodal composing processes, must be accounted for. Ultimately, Gagich writes to explain multimodality and strategies to be used in multimodal composing, yet the biggest takeaway from

her work is the initial issue of first-year students with varying levels of understanding multimodality being presented with the requirement to create a multimodal text.

From the student's perspective, DeVoss et al.'s *On Multimodal Composing* is a webtext that resulted from a University of Louisville graduate-level course on multimodality, in which students considered multimodality and contemporary composition practices before creating a representation of their own multimodal composing processes and analyzing them. While their work produced an entire website full of details and information relating to each step of the project's process, the analysis is significant in framing students' findings on similarities and differences between their individual composing processes and identifying trends found in multimodal composing. Through their analysis, DeVoss et al. present six trends found across their multimodal composing processes: (1) Composing requires using different mediums, tools, and interfaces; (2) composing requires others; (3) composing is tied to the human experience of time; (4) composing happens beyond alphabetic text on the page or screen; (5) composing happens with/through bodies; and (6) composing revolves around influences, collaborations, and intertextual reciprocities ("Analysis"). Further, the group noted the potential aspects of their composing process that may not be visible to the audience through the analysis in the webtext: "Our composing and what our processes revealed tell us much about the embodied, connected, always already happening nature of writing. What isn't perhaps as visible here are the ways in which our composing practices rub up against, fit into, or even explode metanarratives of queerness, race, disability, mothering/hood, and more" (Devoss et al. "Analysis"). All the trends, both visible and not, presented by this course culminate to represent the understanding these students have found of multimodal composing, their role in it, and the role it plays in their writing and everyday lives.

From my own dual perspective as both student and instructor, these works converse with one another in an interesting way. As the instructor of first-year composition, a question of how to get from point A to point B arises: How do we, as instructors, prepare students to work their way from the confusion and varied understanding in Gagich's work to the learning and understanding of multimodal composing and our individual relationships with the processes present in DeVoss et al.'s analysis? The key word in this question being to *prepare* our students. From my own experience with first-year students, many are not ready to analyze their practices for multimodality as done in DeVoss et al.'s graduate-level course. Rather, first-year composition needs to lay groundwork for the students to gain a basic understanding of multimodality over the confusion they enter the classroom with. As DeVoss et al. notes in their analysis, composition is an individualistic experience: "Our videos, in one sense, reflect a plurality of approaches to composing. We shape and are shaped by our spaces in different ways. We acclimate to our composing surfaces in various ways. We do our writing work in different ways" ("Analysis"). As writing is individualistic, our understanding and knowledge of writing is, too. First-year students come from different backgrounds and stages of education—whether high school or another college—and have subjective understandings of the writing process and terms involved. As Gagich notes, some students remember being asked to create a multimodal presentation in high school while others only wrote five paragraph essays. From my own recent experience entering the first-year classroom, I had only heard the term "multimedia presentation" and did not understand this was another term used for "multimodal." Therefore, laying the groundwork for understanding multimodality lies in a student's ability to first recognize and understand the terms being used in these discussions. To ensure each first-year student can work their way towards understanding multimodality and their own connection to it, each of them must begin by having

the vocabulary to recognize it, question it, discuss it, and, eventually, understand it. The introduction of multimodal terms and language into each student's vocabulary at an earlier point in their education (i.e. the first-year composition classroom) provides them with a foundation to build upon throughout their academic journeys.

The works of Gagich and DeVoss et al. present the framework for a problem and outcome, in which instructors must fill in the solution. Gagich's work identifies the issue of first-year students' varied levels of existing knowledge of multimodality and the confusion that many experience when presented with a multimodal assignment for the first time—at least to their knowledge. DeVoss et al.'s webtext is the result of graduate students gaining an understanding of their individual relationships with multimodal composing, which represents the point of understanding we hope students to achieve. This leaves the solution of how to move from confusion to understanding open for instructors to fill in. The suggestion made here is to begin the process in first-year classrooms by laying the foundation of understanding through basic terms and language used in multimodality for students to gain recognition of the terms and the ability to discuss the topic as they grow in their academic careers. By including the new terms in first-year courses, whether that be through larger assignments or simple vocabulary tasks, instructors will begin to instill a basic understanding which allows students to move into discussion, inquiry, and exploration stages as their education continues.

Works Cited

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