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REMIXING COMPOSITION

A HISTORY OF MULTIMODAL WRITING PEDAGOGY

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Prologue

THERE ONCE WAS A TIME when I knew what it meant to be a compositionist. In calling myself a compositionist, I was identifying as a person who possessed specialized disciplinary knowledge about the teaching of writing—specialized disciplinary knowledge of strategies for teaching students to engage reflectively and critically in the complex, multifaceted process of composing *words*. Although I tried to design unique assignments and activities for my writing classes, I was also always conscious that my pedagogical practices had been strongly informed by the tradition of composition scholarship. When I emphasized revision and peer response in my writing classes, I knew that I was drawing on the foundational insights of composing process research from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. When I asked students to experiment with freewriting as an invention technique, I recognized that I was following in the footsteps of Peter Elbow (among others). When I taught students to consider how they were using appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos in their writing, I realized that I was indebted not only to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* but also to Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. When I engaged students in writing critically about social hierarchies of race, class, and gender, I felt confident that I was continuing in the tradition of other compositionists—critical, feminist, and cultural studies pedagogues—who had long been arguing that the teaching of writing is a political act.

There once was a time when I knew what it meant to be a compositionist . . . and then everything changed. Influenced by talking with colleagues as well as by reading scholarly literature, I began to pay attention to the ways that proliferating digital technologies were

transforming what it meant to compose (Ball; DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill; Ellertson; Kress; New London Group; Sorapure; Wysocki). I began to realize that it was not enough to teach students to compose alphabetic texts alone—that students needed to be able to compose with images, sounds, and words in order to communicate persuasively and effectively in the twenty-first century (D. Anderson; Ball and Hawk; Diogenes and Lunsford; Hocks; Journet; C. Selfe, “The Movement”; Shipka, “Multimodal”; WIDE). I began to recognize that many students were already composing multimodal texts outside of school, and that my composition courses might lose relevancy if I didn’t make a space for composing beyond the printed word (George; C. Selfe and Hawisher; Vie; Yancey). I also began experimenting with multimodal composing myself, crafting Flash animations, videos, and websites for both activist and academic purposes.

Drawing on this experience, I started teaching composition students to produce a wide range of multimodal texts, including digital videos, audio essays, collages, animations, and websites. For the most part, I found that students really enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to move beyond the alphabetic. I was often quite impressed with the multimodal texts that students produced, and I found that we often had great class discussions about the rhetorical choices that students made in their digital composing. I began singing the praises of multimodality to anyone who would listen.

Except there was one problem . . . *I no longer knew what it meant to be a compositionist.*¹

Back when I was just teaching students to compose words, I had the confidence that I was drawing my pedagogy from a substantial tradition of composition scholarship—that all of my pedagogical practices were grounded in my specialized disciplinary knowledge about the teaching of alphabetic writing. But when I started teaching students to compose multimodal texts, I felt like I was leaving the composition tradition behind—venturing into uncharted pedagogical waters. What kind of specialized disciplinary knowledge could I *as a compositionist* possibly claim about composing with images and sounds? When colleagues (both in English and outside it) asked what qualified me to teach multimodal composing, how could I respond?

And, furthermore, how could I responsibly integrate multimodal composing into a first-year composition course that was still institutionally mandated to focus on teaching alphabetic literacy? Was it really possible to incorporate multimodal composing in a way that actually enhanced rather than detracted from the teaching of alphabetic writing?²

As I wrestled with these questions, I found myself revisiting many of the classic texts of composition theory from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, looking for moments where past compositionists had attempted to draw connections between alphabetic, auditory, and visual modalities of composing. As I did this rereading, I came to understand that multimodality was not a new fad in composition studies—that compositionists have attempted, at least since the 1960s, to articulate alphabetic writing as a multimodal process that shares affinities with other artistic forms of composing (Berthoff; Corbett; Costanzo; Elbow; Emig; Flower and Hayes; Kytte; Murray; Shor; Smitherman; Williamson). I started to believe that embracing multimodal composing did not necessarily mean turning away from the composition tradition—that in fact the composition tradition had many insights to offer contemporary digital multimodal teachers. In other words, I began to realize that it was time for me (and indeed for the field) to develop a new narrative of *what it means to be a compositionist*—a narrative that would include the many ways that past writing teachers engaged multimodality. It is this new narrative that I begin telling here.