Exploring multimodal pedagogies

With Lydia E. Laucella
**Purpose**

This purpose of this session is to explore some of the core tenets of Jason Palmieri's (2012), *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*. The topics from the text that will be covered include:

- “Alphabetic writing is a profoundly multimodal process” (Palmieri, 2012, p. 44).
- “Recogniz[ing] the limitations of alphabetic text as a modality” (Palmieri, 2012, p. 46).
- “Learning about writing through studying and practicing other arts” (Palmieri, 2012, p.48).

Within these broader topics we will discuss the importance of using multimodal activities across subject areas. We will consider how multimodal approaches to writing can empower students and act as a tool for social change. Further, we will practice creating our own multimodal digital compositions. By session completion, attendees should have gained a foundational understanding of Palmieri's text and should be able to incorporate various types of multimodal literacies in their own classrooms.
Let’s Begin!

Before we jump into Palmieri’s text, I would like to start by having you participate in a free-write.

Please take about three- five minutes to respond to the following prompt:

Imagine a time that you were challenged. Explain how you approached the challenge and whether or not your were successful in overcoming it.
The Need for Production

- As educators, we find ourselves in a situation where we are being told that we must have students produce.
- They need to produce in order to remain engaged students that are more likely to finish their undergraduate degrees.
- They need to produce in order to keep up with global competition.
- They need to produce in order for our classes to be rigorous.
- Yet, the reality is that many times the types of products we are asking them to produce do not represent the types of products that they will be producing in the real-world.
- Moreover, “if economic and technological conditions continue to insist upon a new relationship between writing and reading in contemporary life, schools and society need to be better positioned to understand and respond” (Brandt, 2015, p.91).
The Importance of Writing

- According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities, writing-intensive courses are touted to be one of the eleven High-Impact Practices recommended for success and retention in higher education.
- Indeed, the importance of writing in classrooms has been well-researched and “we must recognize that alphabetic writing remains a valued form of composing that we are institutionally and professionally mandated to teach” (Palmeri, 2012, p.8).
Palmieri (2012) stipulates that “alphabetic writing is a profoundly multimodal process” (p. 44).

Palmieri suggests that “even when we are composing a solely alphabetic product, we often are thinking about multiple symbol systems (visual, auditory, gestural)” (Palmieri, 2012, p.44).

Palmieri argues that allowing students to use multimodal ways to compose can be a powerful way for them to consider alphabetic revisions.

“If we limit students to only alphabetic means of invention and revision, we may unnecessarily constrain their ability to think intensively and completely about their work” (Palmieri, 2012, p.44).
Take a minute to look back on the text that you wrote...

Consider the following:

- What symbols (visual, auditory, gestural) were you thinking about while writing? If you had to read your story out loud, what symbols can you now envision?
- Did you feel limited by writing alphabetically?
- After you have considered these two questions, discuss with a partner for two minutes.
- We will share with the whole group after a few minutes.
Palmieri Enters Again...

- “Recognizing] the limitations of alphabetic text as a modality” (Palmieri, 2012, p. 46).
- “Although alphabetic text is a powerful modality of communication, it cannot adequately convey all of the ideas composers might wish to express; at times, a writer may struggle to express in alphabetic words an idea that might better be expressed in another modality or combination of modalities” (Palmieri, 2012, p.46)
Learning Disorders in Higher Education

- According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “in 2015-2016, the number of students age 3-21 receiving special education services was 6.7 million, or 13 percent of all public school students. Among students receiving special education services, 34 percent had specific learning disabilities”.
- Yet, “only one in four (24 percent) of young adults who received special education services in high school considered themselves to have a disability and inform the school of their need for services in postsecondary education settings”.

More shocking is that “only 17 percent of young adults with LD received accommodations and supports in postsecondary education because of their disability, compared to 94 percent in high school”.

A large portion of incoming college students do not have access to the proper institutional supports and instructional services necessary for success. This discrepancy can trickle down into individual classrooms, ultimately affecting students’ academic success.

Remember, a student with a learning disorder might not find freedom in alphabetic writing.

I believe that incorporating multimodal writing in all courses, not just composition courses, that it can act as a potent agent to work to level the playing field for students with learning disorders.

Multimodal writing allows students to create deep, transformative relationships with texts without limiting their access to writing.
The Active Mind

- If we can focus on teaching writing by “harnessing the ‘active mind’ of the student rather on evaluating the formal correctness of alphabetic products… [we can] develop a composition pedagogy that could enable students to draw connections among-and develop a vocabulary for-all the varied ways they make meaning in their lives” (Palmeri, 2012, p.40).
My Story with Multimodality

Since my days as a Master’s student at Georgia State University, I have been a champion of multimodal learning in my classroom (or so I thought). I wrote about it in my Teaching Philosophy, I included multiple lessons throughout the semester that involved the creation of multimodal assignments (such as acting out lessons) and I could explain to you why it was important- it engages the students and helps them connect to the material, etc. I was sure I had successfully incorporated this idea into my pedagogy. But it was not until I came across an inspiring course as a Ph.D. student, that I began to understand how much I truly did not know about the raw power of multimodal writing and how it can be a multifaceted tool for change. I was only using this tool at the surface level- it was so shiny and pretty and easy to show off- instead of using the tool at its full disposal in the classroom.
I was taking an online Phd. course entitled Research on Writing, which was being taught by Dr. Charles Gonzalez.

Dr. Gonzalez asked us to respond multi-modally to a set of readings about learning disorders. One of the assigned readings was, “Writing Development and Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities: Using Diagnostic Categories to Study Writing Difficulties” (Connelly & Dockrell, 2016).

This reading discussed how a deeper understanding of learning disorders could help us to see how these disorders interrupt writing and the writing process.

The authors posited that learning disorders can cloud the writing process and that “it is expected that problems with written text production will be associated with a range of developmental problems” (Connelly & Dockrell, 2016, p.351).

The authors surmise that learning disorders can “be a potential barrier for students with writing problems in secondary and tertiary education when being taught by subject-specific teachers who are using writing for learning” (Connelly & Dockrell, 2016).
The Response

- Taking the human element away from learning disorders perturbed me.
- I became confounded with the text.
- I felt it was too sterile and did not fully represent learning disorders.
- This perturbation allowed me to envision what I wanted to represent in my multimodal response for Dr. Gonzalez’s class.
- I sat down to create my multimodal piece, and for the first time since being accepted into the Ph.D. program, I cried. I had done what we as educators want all of our students to do, I had made a serious, deep, very personal connection with the reading. I did so because my oldest daughter has a specific learning disorder.
The Creation Process

- To create this drawing I used Sketchpad 5.1.
- I used various filling techniques to create the rain cloud. I did an extensive Google search to find the right images of the mouth, ear and pencil.
- I took great care to illustrate the cloud and rain by choosing the right patterns and colors. I chose gray and black to represent the storm of emotions and I chose a stark white background to symbolize my feeling of loneliness and helplessness.
- I wanted the raindrops to look like they were falling but also to represent my daughter and I’s tears that were shed. I chose the mouth and ear to represent her auditory processing deficits and the question mark represents her short-term memory recall deficits.
- I placed one question mark upside down to enhance my point of how confused and frustrated she was. I chose to make some tears larger than others to represent the varying types of frustration and emotions involved—there were some bad days and then there were some really bad days.
- I chose to place the pencil next to the incoherent words, which I created using a mixture of the Wingdings font and also by just randomly typing.
- These incoherent words represented my daughter’s usually failed attempts to spell and write on her own; when she wrote, her words would not contain characteristics of an English word.
- The letters also represent phonics and how simplistic and yet simultaneously difficult this concept can be for someone with a learning disorder.
**Multimodal Writing Follows the Writing Process**

- Although there are differing theories about defining the multiple stages of the composition process, Murray (2011) defines the writing process as being divided into three stages: “prewriting, writing, and rewriting” (p.4)
- *Prewriting* involves the process that takes place before creating the first draft (Murray, 2011).
- During this time, you are identifying the subject, considering your audience, and possibly daydreaming, outlining, writing notes and brainstorming (Murray, 2011).
- During this phase, I brainstormed, thought about how to best represent the text in an illustration, and most definitely considered my audience.
**My Multimodal Writing Process**

- The next step is *writing*, which includes the creation of a first draft.
- Here I drew out each component. I thought carefully about what elements I should include and what elements were necessary to eliminate in order to make my representation as clear and succinct as possible.
- Just like when I write a paper, I carefully choose the proper words I want to use to express my thoughts. I eliminate, add and eliminate again.
My Multimodal Writing Process

- In the *rewriting* stage, which is characterized by “researching, rethinking, redesigning and rewriting” (Murray, 2011, p. 4), I chose the colors that would best illustrate my drawing, added the text and Google images and made final tweaks to the drawing.
- I made final revisions and sat back to review the final piece.
Palmieri Again...

- “In many cases, students already come to our courses with some previous experience with nonalphabetic form of communication (for example, taking a drawing class, shooting digital images, writing songs, making YouTube videos), but they tend to see the multimodal composing activities as wholly unrelated to the work of the writing class” (Palmieri, 2012, p.48).
- Our job, not only as writing instructors, but as educators, is to help them make that connection.
- Palmieri suggests that we should practice: “Learning about writing through studying and practicing other arts” (Palmieri, 2012, p.48).
Making the connection

Revisit your original piece. Now you will create a multimodal representation of the question that I posed before:

Imagine a time that you were challenged. Explain how you approached the challenge and whether or not you were successful in overcoming it.

- To accomplish this, go to Sketchpad 5.1. (it works on smart devices) or any other digital production program that you are comfortable with.
- Experiment for the next few minutes to create your drawing. You can then save it as a .JPEG and email it to me at lydialaucella@gmail.com if you would like to share with the whole group, I can pull it up on my screen.
- If you do not have time to fully complete your multimodal piece and would still like to share it with me, I would love to receive any submissions.
Conclusion

- Students “all have diverse strengths and limitations in their ability to learn through alphabetic, auditory, visual and kinesthetic means…it is important to provide students with multiple sensory pathways…for inventing and revising alphabetic texts” (Palmeri, 2012, p. 9).
- We must keep in mind that not all students are as equally capable of producing alphabetic texts as others.
- We must consider that multimodal composing is not just a pedagogy that we should place in our toolboxes and come back to every once in a while. It is something we should fully incorporate and fully believe in as an effective, transformative pedagogy.
- What we want is from our students as writers is that moment of inspiration, that moment that students express to us what they have learned and how it has profoundly touched them -This is our life juice as educators.
- I called my experience a storm of emotions, perhaps if we all experience a storm of emotions like I did by creating my multimodal piece, we can begin to understand its true value in the classroom.
References


