

Digital Interference: Challenges in Teaching Multimodal Projects in First-Year Composition

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Introduction

The term “digital” has become almost a buzzword in higher education: the assumption being that if students are doing things that are “digital,” they must be preparing to enter STEM fields. This makes university administrators happy as they can advertise degree outcomes that align with the industries that dominate our media’s discourse which often emphasizes STEM over the humanities. But when we introduce multimodal writing into the composition curriculum, the digital domain is where our expectations first land, flattening the value that the *multi* plays. After completing my year of teaching Composition I & II at a large R1 public institution in the southeastern U.S., I witnessed a lack of support that is specific for multimodal assignments. While there is administrative support for *including* multimodal writing into the curriculum, the literature reveals a continuing lack of technical support to make these projects attainable for all levels of instructors (DePalma & Alexander, 2018; Eidman-Aadah & O’Donnell-Allen, 2012; Flynn, 2018; Lee, 2018). My experience as a Graduate Teaching Associate (GTA) reaffirms these perceptions as I struggled to engage with university resources and the ability to access training opportunities. This article contextualizes the narrative of my approaches in teaching multimodal composition to provide specific recommendations for graduate program administrators and faculty.

Complicating Multimodality

While the idea of obtaining a formal education outside of a physical classroom is not new, recent years have seen a boom in online learning platforms, AI, and hybrid learning models. These technologies have changed teaching methods and students’ abilities to access academic environments. Public health issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, influenza A and RSV, require teachers and students to pivot to asynchronous learning activities, or even taking a Zoom meeting in their cars from their phones. By nature of these realities, we navigate multiple modes simultaneously. A student who is attending a class on Zoom may be watching the screen (visual), listening for their cue to unmute themselves to participate (aural), positioning their face within the camera frame while ensuring their roommate is not visible (spatial and gestural). Then they are assigned a writing task that encompasses all these elements on top of their embodied, multimodal participation. Thus, the state of education is vastly different than it was five years ago, and as more classes are offered online, including those in first-year composition (FYC), it is our responsibility to consider the ways that instructors embody multimodality.

In a discipline that centers on the written word, Stockman (2022) reminds us how multimodal composition is more than writing with additional visuals: “The multimodal compositional process is one that invites writers to understand and engage with the whole of who they are, including their racial and cultural histories, experiences, and the expressive modes and tools they’ve become adept at using within, and more likely, beyond their schools” (p. 16). In this way, the embodied process of engaging in multiple modes in the learning *and* composing allows us to think beyond the visual elements of writing. Students use the auditory, spatial, haptic, and gestural elements to articulate diverse communicative practices that create meaning beyond alphabetic text. If we want students to meaningfully engage in this process, we must recognize that Graduate Teaching Associates/Assistants (GTAs) are often tasked with providing the instructional framework to guide students through this, as GTAs are often the first line of contact between them and their academic writing paths. Tan and Matsuda (2020) signal that instructors need to be prepared for the non-academic side of incorporating multimodality, which results in the “...students’ emotional and affective experiences of disrupting academic convention” (p. 10). This disruption of writing the traditional essay, or alphabetic print-based assignments, is particularly important to note for contingent faculty and GTAs, as they may have less access to resources and institutional support for student reactions to this process.

As a GTA, I am cautious in how I introduce multimodal projects in the classroom. My students seem to have all positive responses with the multimodal activities and assignments I give in both Composition I & II. My only other concern is how this may impact their perceptions of future courses. I explicitly share with them that other professors, within the English department or elsewhere, may not share the same candor and excitement I have for composing in different ways. I do this for two reasons: to help them better understand that every instructor approaches pedagogy in their own way and to protect myself from negative consequences. I do not want my evaluators to disapprove of me for spending more time on multimodal projects than alphabetic-print based texts. And teaching in a state where the legislature passed a “divisive concepts” law, more vulnerable instructors such as GTAs cannot afford to rock the boat in ways that stunt our academic freedom or diminish our livelihood. Both Chen (2021) and Stewart and Stewart (2024) recognize the vulnerability of instructors in FYC programs, and therefore institutional culture and the status of GTAs can greatly influence multimodal pedagogical practices or even efforts.

Trouble with Training and Professional Development (PD)

Shipka (2011) reminds us that the *multi* of multimodality does not mean just digital, and our students consume and compose in different modes, but with limited skill sets: “...far fewer have experience using Flash, Photoshop, PageMaker, Dreamweaver, or Premiere Pro” (p. 19). This prompts me to think about how a GTA's confidence in technical applications can greatly impact their ability to effectively and wholeheartedly teach students how to use them. When suggesting modes for my students’ projects, I am

quick to suggest TikTok videos (which have, however, been banned from our university's Wi-Fi network), Instagram posts, or YouTube videos, solely because I have personal experience with these genres. Never once did I receive instruction on how to compose rhetorically with these tools. If I was ever brave enough to ask whether I could submit a video as a final project, I outsourced my lack of skills to strangers on YouTube or Reddit posts, excitedly following their instructions and thinking about the rhetorical appeals throughout. These two practices never overlapped. As Alam (2024) notes, developing a rapport between GTAs and students in FYC by being open about struggles helps them relate to one another. I am very open with my students about my lack of technical knowledge in certain platforms and recognize that they may have more experience than I have. But the cornerstone of my teaching philosophy is one of collaboration; that is, we can learn how to compose in various modes without fear or criticism from the traditional English teacher.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) publishes position statements on various issues within the discipline. In their statement on preparing GTAs to teach college writing, they do recognize the importance of multimodality. CCCC recommends that programs help GTAs develop "...experience with facilitating writing courses where students practice multiple genres of textual production and refine their digital literacies." (2015). The terminology of "facilitating" writing courses can be misleading, as this assumes that there is a professor who is directly teaching multimodality, giving the GTA an opportunity to learn about the ways that technological platforms can be used to compose. Reflecting back on my first FYC orientation, I think there was maybe a single 60-minute workshop on teaching with technology, but this was more about how to turn on the classroom projector and wrangle your HDMI cord. It is crucial to further consider what other forms of support GTAs are turning to.

My experience echoes that of Pedzinski and Stecher (2024) who report unsatisfactory composition pedagogy training and their need to seek opportunities elsewhere within their university. Starving for more exposure to training, I enrolled in my institution's Online Teaching & Learning course sequence to earn a certificate that would allow me to teach composition sections online in the future. Even though I was already overwhelmed with my teaching, coursework, and outside job, I spent a few hours each week engaging on Canvas with instructors from all departments and programs to earn my certificate. But I dropped out. In an exercise to analyze course outcomes to fit into multimodal settings, we had to upload any set of course outcomes and describe how they fit into the online course. The course outcomes I chose were rejected by the facilitator, and their comments revealed that they were inadequate. These course outcomes were copied verbatim directly from my university's FYC curriculum. The unit tasked with training instructors on developing course design to be taught across modes told me that my own department's official curriculum was insufficient. As a GTA in my first year, this experience was quite disheartening and also confusing. I had made an effort to expand my repertoire of pedagogical training, and this is how I was received. Hoessler and Stockley (2016) point out that "Graduate students do not learn and teach in isolation, but within the context of their groups, departments, institutions, and sector"

(p. 148). After my experience with my university's Teaching & Learning Center, I decided to focus on what the English department could possibly offer.

In-person workshops and guest speakers seem to be the prime areas in which departments implement Professional Development (PD). Tan and Matsuda (2020) describe a "clear gesture of support" for multimodal composition by hosting regular workshops, but the *existence* of workshops does not mean they are accessible to GTAs. At my institution, there is a clear separation of faculty and graduate students, and often I am unsure if events that the department advertises are also open to GTAs. This is exacerbated by the physical segregation between us and faculty: our cubicles are now literally on the other end of campus, in the basement of an old engineering building. This further diminishes the ability to have collaborative experiences. When the university categorizes GTAs as students when it is convenient for them and the department categorizes GTAs as staff when it comes to labor practices, this obscures PD.

The English department offers a series of workshops led by outside scholars, with workshops specifically advertised towards graduate students. They are typically once per semester with free lunches offered to entice our attendance. Since my department has three distinct concentrations, they are divided up by discipline. I am not sure who coordinates and chooses what the topics will be, but I assume it is a group of faculty members or some of the select GTAs whom faculty more closely mentor and receive more guidance and support. Chen's (2021) national survey found that workshops focusing on multimodality are widely reported as ineffective. As a GTA, I rarely can even attend these workshops because they are always during the daytime on a weekday when most of us have to teach, work in the writing center, attend coursework, or work second jobs. Graduate students get almost no say in our schedules, and the days can become more challenging during the mile-long treks between buildings. Our graduate courses have attendance policies that cause us hesitation in attending these workshops. While they are hosted by our own department and engaging with them should be a given, we often teeter the line of wanting to be a good student and wanting to be a confident instructor.

Nevertheless, I spend as much free time as possible learning about ways I can enhance my pedagogy for multimodal composition. This often means trying to become comfortable with software to at least demonstrate using it in the classroom. When setting up my department-issued laptop, I worked with the IT department to download the typical programs we use every day. When I saw the Adobe Creative Suite as an option, I was so excited to have the chance to learn popular software that would take writing projects to the next level. But when I attempted to download it, I was prompted to provide payment information, and the IT support specialist informed me that my department would have to sponsor and pay for an individual license. I stopped, not wanting to raise eyebrows at my request for software to teach the curriculum's multimodal assignment. Instead, I referenced the curriculum's sample multimodal

products on the Canvas shell. Even then, not every instructor has experience with Instagram Reels or X/Twitter Threads. How does this empower and encourage them?

On another occasion, I wanted to explore the resources that our exceptional library has, which includes the ability to borrow camera and videography equipment, a virtual reality room, and a soundproof booth, so I signed up to reserve a sound recording room in the multimedia section called The Studio. By becoming familiar with the reservation process and physical spaces within campus, I hoped to demonstrate the free tools that my students have access to. I have some prior experience with recording podcasts and editing videos, but never in a studio setup which has specialized equipment. But I was in over my head and had no idea where to start. I did not know how to hook up the equipment and later learned that I should have reserved additional items to make it possible. At least I made some effort and found out that I could request an appointment with someone who could help. There is no connection between The Studio and the English department, and this would be extremely helpful in knowing what resources are available to both students and instructors specifically for multimodal composition projects.

Self-Reliance

Going beyond my department and institution, I pivot back to my own peer and personal networks for PD. The majority of pedagogical strategies I use when teaching multimodal writing come from chatting with my cohort friends or seeing what other instructors are doing on social media. While brainstorming ways to engage Composition II students more with their archival research projects, I designed an assignment where they put together a website exhibition to share their work with friends and family. I applied the knowledge from my past career to draft a website template so my students could go in to edit and put their own spin on it. In my personal life, I have always written in a journal and recognize the cognitive value of physically writing in notebooks. This semester I purchased small notebooks for my students to enact Commonplace Books, a way for them to intellectually interact with texts by recording quotes, ideas, and any other information, including sketches, comics, magazine clippings, and photos. I try to gain perspective from how multiple modes can impact a student's experience in FYC. As always, I spoke transparently about my strategies and informed the students that this Commonplace Book activity may be a total flop, but experimenting with our ways of writing is worth the risks.

As Chen's (2021) national survey informs us, most instructors rely on their own training efforts and personal networks to teach multimodal composition, with 10% reporting that they receive training from their institutions. This poses a serious question about the ways which English and Writing and Rhetoric departments respond to what is going on in the field. They are codifying it into the curriculum without providing ongoing development opportunities that are accessible to all instructors, including GTAs. The reliance on personal support networks requires extra labor and assumes that individuals have access to some expertise.

Institutional Barriers

Individual departments play a critical role in engaging GTAs with multimodal composition. Chen (2021) demonstrates that even if instructors possess the knowledge to more actively employ PD, which would provide immediate mentoring opportunities for GTAs, “[they] simply don’t due to various factors such as department cultures, institutional policies, or consequently poor working conditions that rob them of the energy to do so” (p. 86). Chen’s conclusions accurately portray my own experience, as I must work a second job to meet minimal financial security, along with more than half of my cohort. I have a lot of knowledge from my professional life that would invigorate pedagogical practices in teaching multimodality, but even if my department was more accepting, it would be unethical to do so without recognition or financial compensation.

Chen (2021) also urges that PD efforts should be inclusive of all instructors’ experiences and suggests the use of knowledge bases that individuals can contribute to. I agree that this approach of crowd-sourcing resources and tips to teach multimodality is effective and low-maintenance, but departmental culture can be a barrier. In my experience, the contributions of select GTAs seem to be more welcomed than others by department leadership. This results in hesitation by all GTAs in sharing tangible resources such as lesson plans or contacts who can shed light onto software or applications.

Recommendations

Based on my experience as a GTA at a large R1 institution and conversations with my cohort, I provide the following recommendations for improving the teaching of multimodal composition.

1. Offer GTAs the opportunities to submit work in multimodal formats. As Tan and Matsuda (2020) conclude, instructors need the chance to gain experience with multimodality by getting their hands on it. This will let GTAs gain more experience in applying rhetorical thinking skills to new software or platforms, in turn simultaneously building their skillset to be used concurrently in the classroom. I have been told by other students, and a few faculty members (unofficially), that it *is* possible to do a dissertation that is multimodal or something other than what is traditionally produced. But these are just rumors, and not written down anywhere that I can find. Record-keeping and providing transparent information is another challenge at my institution, creating yet another barrier for GTAs. Being open to multimodal projects within the graduate curriculum removes barriers for multimodality to simply be seen within the academy, let alone rewarded. Programs should demonstrate that multimodal approaches are possible for all. This includes literature and creative writing tracks because they are still teaching FYC, and if the goal is to continue being an educator at other institutions, the

skills of multimodal writing will be critical in facilitating learning for all student populations.

2. Integrate resources across both the department and campus. There needs to be more widespread application of implementing multimodality instead of just giving it a spot in the curriculum. So many of the resources provided at my institution, housed in Canvas or on a Google Drive, are to provide examples of specific genres, not actively partnering with instructors on how to teach it. Only then will GTAs feel more confident to step forward and demonstrate ways they teach multimodality. There is potential to close the gaps between institutional resources as well, as shown by my experience between The Studio and English department. The resources are here, but how can we effectively access them?
3. Allow GTAs flexibility to participate in PD. I urge faculty to be considerate of misguided attendance policies for graduate students. GTAs should be welcome to attend workshops or professional development events on campus and should not miss out on these opportunities simply from the fear of receiving a lower final grade if their class conflicts. GTAs teaching FYC are professional educators, and departments lose sight of this. We should not have to choose between being a good graduate student and being active, developing teachers – we should be allowed to be both.
4. Consider how departmental culture stunts pedagogy. The select few in administrative roles such as Assistant Director of Composition or those in dissertation phases should not be the only contributors to curricular development and training. By opening up channels of resource sharing, we can hear from those who have experience outside of what Shipka (2011) calls “an overly narrow definition of technology” (p. 20).

Conclusion

Reframing composition to welcome and experiment with multimodally has been extremely rewarding as a GTA, regardless of the struggles I have faced. Chen’s (2021) national survey points to the satisfaction in seeing students succeed in multimodal composition. I love getting to see students realize that the writing they are familiar with on their phones and social media *is* writing, and composing multimodally absolutely has a place in academic and professional discourse, despite the attitudes their previous teachers may have had towards it. As described in my experience as a GTA, we should not overlook the ways that logistical challenges while being a graduate student can impact the development of teaching multimodal writing in the FYC classroom.

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