

Dissertation Abstract

“Now with More Modes?: The Curricular Design and Implementation of Multimodality in Undergraduate Major Programs in Writing/Rhetoric”

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In her 2004 CCCC Chair’s Address, “Made Not Only in Words,” Kathleen Blake Yancey speaks to the ways in which writing practices are changing due to advances in new technologies. One such change is writers using other modes than just the written word to create texts: that is, people are manipulating images, sometimes pairing them with words; they are recording and editing audio, much of which began as words; and they are creating videos, many of which include words, audio, and still images. In short, many people are now creating what Gunther Kress, Cynthia Selfe, and others have come to call multimodal texts, texts created using at least two culturally available modes: written word, static image, moving image, color, sound, gesture, and layout.

Considering the recent shifts in writing and fearing that we in the field of rhetoric and composition have already made ourselves “anachronistic” (302), Yancey argues that we need to alter the writing curriculum. Toward that end, she proposes a new curriculum keyed toward 21st century writing practices, one that is not limited to the first-year level and that would therefore extend vertically. As she says, “it is past time that we fill the glaringly empty spot between first-year [writing] and graduate education with a [writing] major” (308).

Shortly after her Address, the CCCC Executive Committee moved to create The Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric, which has been charged with identifying different writing majors and documenting their curricular features, such as required and elective courses as well as goals and outcomes. Since then, we’ve witnessed a proliferation of undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric. In addition, we’ve seen a continued increase in multimodal composing.

Given the rise of undergraduate major programs, coupled with the simultaneous rise of multimodal composing—as signaled by Yancey and by the increase in scholarship surrounding multimodality (e.g., Kress 2005, 2010; Selfe 2007; Morrison 2011; Shipka 2011; Sheridan et al. 2012; Palmeri 2012; Lutkewitte 2013)—I’m interested in the ways these two phenomena intersect to define a new major in the field. In other words, the proliferation of undergraduate major programs over the past decade provides an exigence for inquiry, but within that is another exigence: the way these major programs do or do not attend to the practice of multimodality. This project responds to the latter by providing a portrait of current multimodal curricula within undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric. To provide such a portrait, this project focuses specifically on three dimensions that together speak to the way a given composing practice is implemented and valued within the curriculum: pedagogy, assessment, and support. As such, this project will demonstrate how undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric are *teaching*, *assessing*, and *supporting* the practice of multimodality. To that end, I’ve identified 21 undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric and surveyed program representatives of those major programs about the teaching, assessing, and supporting of multimodality. Of those 21 undergraduate major programs, 19 agreed to participate.

This project also provides a microscopic picture of the curricular role of multimodality within undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric through case studies of three major programs in particular. The curricular presence of multimodality will most likely vary across major programs, and one reason for such variance is the extent to which multimodality is emphasized within the major. The implementation of multimodality will most likely look different for a major that makes it a priority as compared to one that makes it one focus amongst many. In order to highlight as well as value multimodality's varying presence within undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric, I conducted case studies of major programs with different degrees of multimodal activity: one of a program with low multimodal activity located in the Northwest, one of a program with medium multimodal activity located in the South, and another of a program with high multimodal activity located in the Midwest. Each case study involved gathering curricular materials (e.g., syllabi, assignment prompts, assessment rubrics) and interviewing two individuals: (1) the program representative who completed the survey and (2) a faculty member who includes multimodality within his/her pedagogy and/or who was involved in the curricular design of the undergraduate major.

This project and the portrait it provides of multimodal curricula in undergraduate major programs in writing and rhetoric will be valuable by sharing not only how multimodality is implemented within the curriculum but also what those devising and teaching within these major programs have learned via the developmental process. As a result, this project offers those in the field who are looking to include multimodality in their undergraduate course and/or make multimodality an emphasis within their undergraduate major with an understanding of how other major programs have developed and implemented a curriculum that emphasizes multimodality. This project will also highlight what circumstances can foster and/or constrain multimodal activity and outline the type of infrastructure needed to implement and support the practice of multimodality.

Works Cited

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