

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Going multimodal in an undergraduate English Communication course: student participation and reactions

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Research Domain: The Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: This project is in response to the need to expose higher education students to multimodal composition (writing using image, text, sound) to better equip them with rhetorical tools for more effective communication in an increasingly digitized world. The aims of this study are to 1) investigate student attitudes towards creating multimodal projects, 2) examine any advantages or disadvantages participants report to doing multimodal projects, and 3) investigate the choices (e.g. linguistic, design) that students make when composing multimodally. Thirty-nine students in an English Communication course at a university in the UAE created two multimodal projects: 1) a webpage on Google Sites including writing and research tips; and 2) a video connected to a semester-long research project. This presentation will discuss survey and interview data related to student reactions to the multimodal projects, show student examples of the different choices made while completing the projects, and discuss implications of the study.

Paper: Multimodal composition is defined as compositions that utilize a “range of rhetorical resources” to create meaning, such as words, still images, moving images, sound, and animation (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 59). Our world is multimodal, but the assignments which many students may be asked to produce in higher education academic writing classes do not reflect our multimodal world. Why is this new form of literacy not appearing more often in undergraduate writing courses, if students are already producing multimodal texts outside the classroom? Is it because traditional print-based literacy is firmly entrenched in academia, and as Jewitt (2008) states is a matter of power and what is “allowed to count” (p. 253)? Or, does traditional print-based literacy like writing essays serve a more practical purpose for students at university?

This research project seeks to investigate this tension between traditional and new literacies at a university in the UAE by investigating student reactions to, and choices made, while completing two multimodal projects—a website and a video.

Multiliteracies and Multimodal Composition

The theoretical framework of this study is multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and the idea

that a different view of literacy is necessary because of the opening up of multiple communication channels made available by new technologies. Bezemer and Kress (2008) state that learning is increasingly done through digital media instead of the textbook, and that image is challenging written text as the primary mode for representing information.

This shift in literacy as a result of new technologies has expanded the field of academic writing in higher education to include multimodal composition. Lutkewitte (2014) states that multimodal composition is becoming more popular in the composition classroom as instructors and students are recognizing that both old and new technologies have enabled and necessitated the use of multiple modes of communication. This can be beneficial for learners as the different modes of communication are co-dependent and “each affects the nature of the content of the other and the overall rhetorical impact of the communication event itself” (NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies, 2005).

Aims of the study and research questions

The aims of this research project are to expose students to multimodal communication in an undergraduate academic writing class, and investigate students' reactions to and choices made while creating multimedia projects. More specifically, this study asks the following research questions:

1. Do participants believe creating multimodal projects are useful for learning?
2. What do participants report as the advantages and disadvantages of doing multimodal projects?
3. What choices (e.g. linguistic, design) do students make when composing multimodally?

Process and Research Methodology

Thirty-nine participants in an English Communications course at a university in the UAE created two multimodal projects. The first project was a website which included grammar tips, and research methodology and report writing tips. The point of this activity was to 1) teach students how to make a website which included multimodal elements, 2) have students identify unknown areas (or areas of weakness) in relation to writing and doing research, and 3) put students at the center of the learning process by having them teach each other through a multimedia platform. The second assignment was a short video which represented the different parts of their research project, including background, aim, methodology, and results. This idea was inspired by the University of Melbourne's (and now throughout Australia) [Visualize your Thesis](#), where PhD students present their thesis in a one minute video.

To answer research question #1 and #2, a mixed-method explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2015) was employed using a self-designed survey and interviews (n=7) which occurred after to more deeply explain the survey results. Close-ended survey items were used to gather quantitative data and the survey also included open-ended questions to “explain the quantitative results in more depth (Creswell, 2014, p. 6)”, and explore advantages and limitations of using multimodal projects. To answer research question #3, an analysis of student digital artefacts, and classroom observations, were used to examine the linguistic and design choices students made while completing their multimodal projects.

Preliminary Results

Although this study is still in progress, data collection is complete, and preliminary results for Research Questions #1 and #2 show that 80% of participants found the website useful for reasons such as it was a new and unique way to learn course information, and it made learning more interactive. However, more than half of the participants did not find making the video useful. Some challenges participants faced for both multimodal projects were related to the length of time it took to create the projects, problems editing video, and finding fair use images. Despite these challenges, 93% of participants agreed that using video, image, and audio helped them communicate their research more effectively.

For Research Question #3, examination of student work and classroom observations showed that participants had varied approaches to composing multimodally, with some participants relying more on visual modes of communicating, and others on recorded audio or printed text. Also, students' language use varied between formal and informal, and some students generated their own unique content while others borrowed content from published sites. Finally, participants reported having problems finding copyright free material and appropriately citing media.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to add knowledge about how higher education students can use new forms of representation to increase their meaning-making potential—for example how the interplay of image and written language can produce or show coherence as “image can be used to reinforce” the meaning of what is spoken or written (Jewitt, 2005, p. 316). Although print-based literacy still holds valuable currency in academia, I believe that multimodal communication and the use of image, gesture, and sound can open up new possibilities of representing meaning, and that literacy should not only be thought of as a “linguistic accomplishment” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 241). This study seeks to collect data and report results which contribute to the growing field of multiliteracies, which is becoming more relevant as new technologies compete with traditional print-based technologies. The need to expose students to multimodal communication affects how writing is taught at the undergraduate level, and can also influence how we, as higher education researchers, communicate the results of our own research.

References

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