



Integrating Digital Media into Multimodal Compositions: Five Trends in the Transfer of Rhetorical Skills

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Abstract

During the summer of 2014, six faculty members taught a cMOOC at Virginia Commonwealth University. The course, which was called Inquiry and the Craft of Argument, is a general education course focused on three skill areas: written communication, critical thinking, and information fluency. This study is an analysis of the students' final multimodal compositions, defined as projects that combine academic argument and research with a variety of multimedia, such as images, videos, animations, and internet links. Our findings indicate that there are five trends that are common to the students' work and that they struggled to transfer their knowledge of print composition to their digital multimodal projects.

Key Words: cMOOC, multimodal, multimedia, learning transfer

Introduction

During the summer of 2014, six faculty members taught Virginia Commonwealth University's first cMOOC. Unlike a traditional MOOC in which students work in isolation, a cMOOC is an online course in which students learn together in a purposely connected way. Two types of participants were invited to participate in the course: the public, who could enroll for free, and VCU students, who could register for academic credit. The course, called UNIV 200: Inquiry and the Craft of Argument, is a general education class that all VCU students are required to take. The course takes the place of freshmen composition and focuses on three skill areas: writing, critical thinking and information fluency.

During the summer, we adapted the course to the online environment and ran a pilot with six teachers, each teaching one section which was capped at 20 students. We also reframed the course content to explore the early American history of new media--including works by Douglas Engelbart, Ted Nelson, and Alan Kay--and we renamed the course, *Thought Vectors*, which was reminiscent of work by Engelbart.

The ThoughtVectors website (thoughtvectors.net) was designed to break down the traditional "silos" in which online courses typically exist. The six sections were aggregated through a central hub which functioned as the course home page. Here, students could navigate the entire course, including visiting all classroom sites, reading their professor's and peers' blogs, and accessing the twitter feed for the class. In addition, the Thoughtvectors site was designed so student blog posts were constantly aggregated and updated on the home page. On any given day, a visitor might encounter posts by over 120 students, instructors, and/or outside participants.

Throughout the 8-week course, students in all six sections shared readings and similar daily assignments that asked them to think critically about the texts and the digital world around them. Instead of analyzing texts in isolation, the blog platform gave students the opportunity to share their reading experiences on their blog sites. Ultimately, students created a final multimodal composition to support an argument about a topic of their choice.

In order to study multimedia texts, a general understanding of the term "multimodal composition" is necessary. The term is used primarily in composition theory and teaching practice to describe a work that integrates both text and other forms of media--such as images, video, music, etc. As such, the term "multimodal composition" is used to describe a wide variety of types of projects--from an advertisement that contains both image and text, to an academic poster or a video documentary. Throughout the cMOOC course, students produced numerous multimodal texts in their blogs. However this study focuses only on the students' final multimodal compositions, which we defined as a project that combines academic argument and research with a variety of multimedia, such as visual images, videos, animations, links, and sounds.

The cMOOC provided the opportunity for a close analysis of the multimodal compositions that students produced as their final projects in six online sections of the course. In this paper we identify consistent problematic trends in students' use of media in these compositions, many of which indicate their struggle to transfer knowledge and skills from print to the online environment.

Research Methods

This is a qualitative analysis of student multimodal compositions produced in a cMOOC at Virginia Commonwealth University. As teachers of composition, our research was propelled by our initial assumption that students would transfer rhetorical knowledge from print to multimodal compositions. When our assumptions were not met, we questioned why students struggled with this basic learning transfer.

Using components of grounded theory, we developed a qualitative approach to analyze student compositions by identifying commonalities in students' integration of multimedia in their final projects. These commonalities were coded and categorized and yielded five specific trends that explain the students' struggle to transfer rhetorical knowledge from print to multimodal compositions.

Findings and Discussion

First, students struggled to transfer their knowledge about the rhetorical situation in writing to their work with multimedia. Since our course was focused on argument, we provided instruction in rhetoric and the rhetorical situation. Rhetoric is the art of persuasive communication, and the rhetorical situation refers to an awareness of audience, purpose and context. Rhetorical strategies help a writer tailor communication to a particular audience and purpose.

Early rhetoricians, such as Plato and Aristotle, focused their discussions of rhetoric on oral, and later, written discourses. More recently, Joan Leach (2000), Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Science Communication at the University of Queensland, explains that semiotic theory “opened the door to images” and other forms of “non-verbal communication” as objects for rhetorical analysis (p.209). Likewise, Jason Palmeri (2012), in *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Composition*, states that even in the 1960's, compositionists such as Edward Corbitt were already suggesting that “the classical rhetorical techniques for analyzing an audience of a speech are not necessarily substantially different than the techniques required for analyzing the audience of a print or electronic composition” (p.93).

Students in the United States study the rhetorical situation through the analysis of writing, advertisements and other media throughout their academic careers. By the time they enter our course, which is the final one in a series of three writing classes, most students know how to tailor their print texts to meet the expectations of an academic audience. As a result, we assumed that the students would transfer this basic knowledge about the rhetorical situation into the new medium they were using when creating multimodal compositions online, but students failed to transfer this vital concept. For example, a student who wrote an argument about the harmful effects of binge watching Netflix, features an animated image of a man being hit in the head with a boombox and a sexualized cartoon dancer amidst falling hotdogs. While his text articulated serious concerns about this addictive practice, his images do not reflect this same tone. When questioned about his choice of images, the student explained that he was trying to “lighten the mood.” What is interesting is that the student understood the need to maintain an academic voice throughout his paper, but he did not transfer this knowledge of audience and purpose to his selection of media. Indeed, his rhetorical choices

regarding media indicate a failure to understand the rhetorical situation and actually undermine the serious message he is making in his argument.

Second, students struggled with the rhetorical situation by making design choices that were not appropriate to the audience. In contrast to their print papers that conform to specific requirements as defined by the teacher, students who compose multimodal compositions in the online environment must make important rhetorical choices regarding design principles such as color of text, choice of font, background colors, and selection and customization of theme. While the inability to transfer knowledge and skills accounts for some of the struggle to define and employ these design principles, it is important to note that a lack of training in design figures prominently into the problem. Because most teachers have traditionally required students to submit work according to distinct specifications--in print, using a black Times New Roman or Arial font, double spaced with one inch margins--students are not taught to make decisions about the medium in which they write or the media that they will use.

For example, while students know that printing an academic paper in bright colored Comic Sans would send a more unprofessional and less academic message than using black Times New Roman, they did not transfer this basic knowledge about font appropriateness to their multimodal projects. One of our students, who was studying female beauty standards, placed a white curly font atop multiple, alternating boxes of bright colors. Additionally, in an attempt to choose a sci-fi Wordpress theme and wallpaper, a student who wrote about artificial intelligence produced a multimodal composition in which the flashy and distracting background image makes the text nearly unreadable. These are clearly inappropriate rhetorical choices in terms of design, and yet enough a significant number of students made these kinds of errors, causing us to suspect that we began to suspect that transfer of skills from print to multimodal texts was not happening. These examples are representative of our student's design choices as a whole, and they clearly illustrate the inability to transfer knowledge; however, significantly, they also illustrate their lack of education and training regarding design.

According to Cynthia Selfe (2004), professor of English at Ohio State University and well-known scholar in the field of multimodal composition, "It is not unusual for faculty raised on alphabetic literacy and educated to teach composition before the advent of image-capturing software, multimedia texts and the World Wide Web to feel inadequate to the task of teaching students about new media texts and the emerging literacies surrounding these texts" (p.67). Sonya Borton (2008), whose dissertation examines how students transfer skills from print to other mediums, echoes Selfe's assertion and argues that both students and instructors "need an effective way to discuss issues of design and presentation" in multimodal compositions because "a grammar based solely on design becomes problematic when dealing with new media's place in composition studies" (p.6). Borton aptly suggests Lev Manovich's well-known cinematic approach to new media texts, which denotes five principles of new media as numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding. Borton also references Daniel Keller, who argues for "terms to help students engage in multimodal texts, which primarily focus on the language of photography such as "camera angle," "voiceover," and "soundmark." However, if these approaches are to be used in

the composition classroom, instructors of composition and rhetoric must be trained in complex theory related to visual studies

Because it is not feasible to require composition instructors to learn and subsequently teach these complex and discipline-specific terms and theories to students, Borton argues that “Scholars need to build a specific rhetorical vocabulary necessary to connect the context of multimodality to print” (10). Unfortunately, if we don’t build this vocabulary, most writing teachers will either “continue to favor the written text” (Borton, p. 6) or continue to receive multimodal compositions that disregard the rhetorical situation in terms of design.

Third, not only did students struggle in their multimodal compositions to adapt their work to a particular audience, they often chose media that did not support their arguments. Research in composition theory is not needed to establish that evidence should always support the claim in question. Granted, some students struggle with selecting the best evidence to support their claims in print texts as well; however, rarely do students choose evidence that is so digressive or tangential to the argument that it confuses the reader. Unfortunately, all too often students inserted videos or images that failed to support their claims. For example, a student who was writing about the Affordable Care Act questioned the impact it would have on research funding for university medical centers, such as the one on our campus at VCU. As evidence, she inserted a promotional video for the university’s medical center and basketball team, featuring doctors in lab coats playfully performing medical tests on basketballs interspersed with live clips from basketball games. This promotional video does not support the argument the writer makes about potential funding cuts. Given her intention as a writer to incite concern in the reader about the loss of research funding due to the Affordable Care Act, the video actually undermines her own writerly intentions. In a second example, a writer argues that employees must use discretion when posting on social media, and he uses an image of a political button that says “Every Tweet Counts.” The only connection the reader can establish between the image and his argument is that Twitter is an example of social media. However, the source for the original image is a political blog that advocates using Twitter for political campaigns, which is completely unrelated to her argument about using discretion on social media. In this example, as in the previous one, students did not choose media that supported their arguments.

When students did choose appropriate media that supported their claims, they often failed to introduce or provide context for the media. In our sequence of courses, we use MLA and APA citation rules to teach students to introduce quoted material from studies and unpack data in tables; however, we do not provide this same instruction with images. Often, writing handbooks for undergraduates that contain instruction in citation do not provide clear directions for how to integrate images in online multimodal compositions. Indeed, the official publication manuals for MLA and APA have not been updated in 7 years and 5 years respectively, and both remain ambiguous about how images should be used in academic writing. In fact, MLA continues to encourage tables and charts (and presumably images) to be indexed in an appendix at the end of the essay, a practice that is not conducive to multimodal composition.

By the time students take our second-year composition course, they have been taught that a chart or table must be referenced and explained in the body of their

essay. We assumed they would transfer this knowledge when they inserted images and videos in their multimodal compositions. However, often this transfer did not occur. Instead, students simply inserted images or videos without any introduction or reference to them in their written text; and without this necessary explanation, the media failed to function as useful evidence or example in their argument. For example, a student who studied high incarceration rates for African Americans argued that many judges were racist. The student inserted an image of a judge to supplement his argument. However, because the image was not introduced or captioned, the reader could not identify the judge. Another student who wrote about NASA's use of social media created a section of his multimodal composition devoted to "Computer Innovation." In this section, the student inserted images that were unrecognizable and unidentifiable. In both of these cases, students did not provide captions that contextualized their images; hence, these images did not serve as reliable support for their arguments. Instead, their chosen images functioned as random visual digressions and obstacles for the reader, instead of useful evidence.

Although most students view hypertexts daily as they read online, our students struggled to effectively mimic the use of links in their multimodal compositions. According to George P. Landow (2006), Professor of English and Art History at Brown University and editor-in-chief of the Victorian web, hypertext "denotes text composed of blocks of text--what [Roland] Barthes termed a *lexia*--and the electronic links that join them" (p.3). However, Landow notes that hypertext includes more than text and links; it "denotes an information medium that links verbal and non-verbal information" such as images, diagrams, maps, video or sound (p.3). Landow explains that when links are used in hypertexts, they are often used as a replacement for traditional footnotes. When a reader encounters a footnote, s/he "leaves the main text to read that note," which can contain passages that "support the argument in question" or provide further information about the source (p.3). Like a footnote, links serve a twofold purpose: to provide the reader with additional information about the word(s) in which the link is embedded and to establish credibility by pointing to other sources which support the claim. In sum, an effective link anticipates the needs of the intended reader.

Rather than supporting the point in question or establishing credibility, students often identified phrases for linking that did not need additional information, or chose the wrong words in which to embed the links. Instead of embedding a link to the title or author of a source article, a student chose instead to embed a link to the word "intentions" in his sentence, a word that did not signify where the link would take the reader. *What further information might a reader need about the word "intentions"?* That is the question the reader is left considering. Likewise, a student who introduced a direct quote did not link to the actual source of the quote, but instead opted to include a link to the Siena College Marketing Department because the professor she quoted worked there. Conversely, students frequently identified useful words for linking but linked to pages that were not the most illustrative of their point. For example, a student who mentioned the *Huffington Post* chose to use the name of the newspaper as a link. However, rather than link to the newspaper's own "about page," she linked to a tertiary source that very briefly described the newspaper in a way that could not possibly be as accurate as the newspaper's own account of itself.

While we expected students to use too many links in their final projects that would distract the reader, we were surprised to find that most students tended to use too few or even no hyperlinks at all. This finding was especially surprising because we required students to use links in all of their blog posts during the course. While we believed we had taught students to use links in their writing, many final projects included no hyperlinks at all, even when they were often needed. In one particularly illustrative example, a student who argued that viewers should be wary of online health information included no links to the dubious online health information that she referenced in her project. In this case, she failed to anticipate the reader's need for visual examples of the health information which she criticized

Conclusion

While we pointed out some of the challenges students faced in integrating hyperlinks in their multimodal compositions, we found students who used links demonstrated a consistent trend in providing links to the original sources from which they were quoting or paraphrasing. Interestingly, students seemed to transfer their understanding about how in-text citations function in academic writing to the hyperlinking of sources in multimodal compositions. The ease at which they transferred this knowledge is notable, given their struggle to transfer other rhetorical conventions related to anticipating audience needs.

Traditional rhetorical language used in Composition did not help us provide instruction to students for how an animated image may function in an argument, or how a playful meme may suggest implications that impact or undermine their rhetorical appeals. To address these concerns, we needed a language of design that went beyond the scope of traditional rhetoric. Because composition scholars have not yet established this “bridge language” (Borton, 2008), we lack a vocabulary to offer effective instruction in rhetorical practices related multimodal composition.

While students faced challenges with design and audience in creating multimodal compositions, most of those who submitted final projects were successful in meeting the writing and research expectations of the course. Students transferred knowledge about elements of argument and rhetorical appeals within the body of their written texts. However, their struggle to consider audience as they integrated visual media in their multimodal compositions leads us to realize that as instructors we must develop best practices for this gap in digital composition instruction. Our hope is to further analyze some of the trends we have observed, as well as a trend we did not address in this paper regarding considerations of intellectual property and copyright, and move toward developing best practices.

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