Chapter 16

Writing Remixed: Mapping the Multimodal Composition of One Preservice English Education Teacher

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the creation of a digital multimodal poem by Mara, a preservice English Education teacher at a large state namesake university located in the Southeastern United States. Drawing on sociocultural perspectives broadly and New Literacies Studies specifically (Gee, 2012; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; The New London Group, 1996), this study uses multimodal discourse analysis (Jewitt, 2006; Lemke, 1998; O’Halloran, 2009) as a tool to analyze how one preservice teacher’s multimodal composition affected her concept of new literacies. To investigate what Mara learned through the multimodal composing process, the authors analyze three sources of data: a) Mara’s multimodal composition, b) Mara’s written reflection about her composing practices written immediately after she had created her multimodal composition, and c) a ninety-minute interview with Mara using photo-elicitation techniques. Findings indicate that multimodal composing practices can potentially take advantage of the relation between cognition and affect, and do so using cultural means of codification that are both inscribed by textual authors and encoded by acculturated readers. Such experiences and affordances of electronic devices, a trend that is likely to grow as technology continues to advance and become pervasive in the lives of succeeding generations.

INTRODUCTION

I had to approach this project by seeing the two ‘texts’ as two separate but intimately connected art forms. - Mara

I (first author Lindy) started teaching my writing methods course in the same way I started my ninth-grade English Language Arts classes in Boston: with the “I am from” poem assignment, a form poem that uses George Ella Lyons’ poem, “Where
I’m from” (see http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html), as a mentor text for students to reformulate with details from their own lives to reflect on how their experiences have shaped their identity. I used this assignment as a way to start building a community of writers, to show what I mean when I talk about a writing workshop, and to get to know a bit more about students’ lives and backgrounds.

When I introduced the assignment to my pre-service writing teachers, there were audible groans from the room. “I hate writing poetry,” lamented Julie. “I don’t know how to write poems,” said Katie. “Are you serious?” asked Maggie. (All names are pseudonyms.) I was a bit surprised to come up against such resistance from future English teachers, but I pressed on. After the class analyzed the content and form of Lyons’ poem, the students wrote their own poems in class. At the end of the class I asked if anyone were willing to share her poem, or even a line or two. Three students raised their hands, but the rest were reticent. Many students struggled with how to end their poems, or how to make their poems “good,” but all were able to come up with a poem—however cursory it might have been.

The next week I had the students create a multimodal version of their “Where I’m from” poem in which they could add images, music, or a voiceover to their poem, deleting or revising their poem in any way they saw fit. I showed students a few tools such as Animoto and taught them how use Google Images. Though my students are considered by many to be digital natives—those who have grown up with electronic devices and so consider them a normal part of life—they reported that they had limited experiences with digital writing aside from using social media on the Internet, and had less knowledge of Web-based tools for digital composing than their instructors, who were all in their thirties.

The next two weeks students worked on their multimodal poems at home. Some students spent all weekend working on their poems to get them “just right.” The day the multimodal poems were due, I asked if anyone were willing to share their composition. To my surprise, every hand—all 24—went up.

Several students had created multimodal poems that included original music. Jenna’s poem, for instance, was accompanied by her singing and playing guitar, and pictures of friends who held sheets of paper that said, “I’m from . . . .” Other students had gathered videos from their early childhoods: performing gymnastics, singing in a children’s choir, at the beach. One student had overlain an original song written and performed by his father (a musician) with black and white video footage of himself as a young boy. Another had composed an original song to accompany his poem, and then juxtaposed his playing the bass with video of him speaking his poem.

After seeing about half of the multimodal poems, and then responding in writing to the authors, several students insisted that we show and discuss each production. The multimodal poem of one student in particular, Mara, stood out as producing an especially strong emotional reaction, including tears, from many of her classmates. Many students said that Mara’s poem was their favorite and that it stood out as being especially powerful. To better understand what it was about Mara’s poem that made it so emotionally impactful, I enlisted the assistance of second author Peter Smagorinsky, and we asked the following questions about Mara’s composition:

1. What aspects of Mara’s poem contributed to the effect that it had on her classmates?
2. What are the different semiotic resources Mara drew on to compose her multimodal poem?
3. How did these semiotic resources work together to create a composition that produced an emotional response from Mara’s classmates?