Chapter 21

Training Instructors to Teach Multimodal Composition in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses practical strategies for training teachers to teach multimodal composition in online courses. Specifically, trainers should focus on at least four skill sets: developing and scaffolding multimodal assignments; creating multimodal instructional tools; incorporating technology labs within the curriculum; and adopting and adapting the multimodal ePortfolio as a reflective document for showcasing student learning. Teachers particularly benefit from these skill sets, which enable them to guide students in acquiring such multimodal literacies as learning to design rhetorically effective multimodal projects for various audiences and purposes. The chapter offers theoretical and practical advice for trainers where the instruction will occur in online settings as well as the training itself. This advice also is useful for teachers of face-to-face (onsite) multimodal courses when using a robust learning management system (LMS) for student support.

INTRODUCTION

Given the necessity of composing and communicating with multimodal tools for business and social purposes, rhetoric and composition scholars have turned to multimodal composition as a way to teach students to become successful twenty-first century communicators (e.g., Ball, 2012; Borton & Huot, 2007; Selber, 2004; VanKooten, 2013; Wysocki, 2005). Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) defined multimodal composition as the creation of a text that uses more than one mode to communicate; these modes can include, but are not limited to, sound, images, text, video, and animation. Lauer (2009) extended this definition to include the consideration of rhetorical choices in the creation of such texts, meaning stu-
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dents must consider their audience and purpose for communicating, which will ultimately guide them in choosing appropriate modes and media for communicating; DePew (2015) supported this position and extended the need to understand the rhetoricity of all online composition instruction. Much of the current scholarship surrounding multimodal composition has discussed how to implement the pedagogy in traditional, face-to-face, or onsite, classes (e.g., Lauer, 2009; Selfe, 2009; Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007). Blair (2015) reflected on how poorly this goal of teaching multimodal composition is being addressed in online education. Because more than 7.1 million students are taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014) and growth in online education currently is outpacing onsite enrollment (Kelly, 2014), it is time for multimodal pedagogy to be established solidly and purposefully in online education.

In the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction’s (CCCC OWI Committee, 2013) A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, OWI Principle 4 indicated that teachers should migrate and adapt appropriate theory and practice from the traditional classroom to the online environment. However, albeit much earlier, Hewett and Ehmann (2004) expressed that wholesale migration is problematic (xii), noting a fundamental difference between onsite and online classrooms, which Hewett (2015c) extended into ways that teachers and students interact in online settings. OWI Principle 3 (CCCC OWI Committee, 2013) considered this difference as one where new theories and practices need to be developed for online settings. Hewett (2015b) theorized that the online setting’s most fundamental difference from the traditional one is literacy-based in that students must read much of the instructions and content and must translate that reading into their composing strategies. Although there is a prevalence of linear alphabetic discourse involved, even when much of what students read and view in the online classroom is multimodal (including screen capture lectures, podcasts, and other media), students must interpret their reading of such texts and engage it in their composing, at times leading to what Hewett called a cognitive leap on the students’ parts where they must learn from the written instruction and put it into practice in their own writing, often without the benefit of additional teacher intervention or coaching. As an extension of this thinking, it therefore seems imperative that when multimodality is part of the instruction, the ways multimodal tools are presented and taught must be done effectively such that they can serve as comprehensible and imitable models for students’ multimodal composing (Rankins-Robertson et al., 2014).

Teachers need specific training in at least four useful skill sets that are helpful when migrating multimodal composition into the online classroom: (1) developing and scaffolding multimodal assignments based on theoretical concepts (Hess, 2007), (2) creating multimodal instructional tools (Rankins-Robertson et al., 2014), (3) incorporating technology labs that prompt students to use new technology (T. Bourelle, A. Bourelle, & Alapin, forthcoming 2016), and (4) adopting ePortfolios and teaching students to craft ones that showcase multimodal projects and critical reflection (Shipka, 2011). With special attention to the OWI Principles articulated in the CCCC OWI Position Statement (CCCC OWI Committee, 2013), this chapter offers administrators, who are often the trainers (henceforth called trainers) who hire and engage teacher-trainees (henceforth called trainees), a series of specific skill sets that trainees should have when teaching multimodal composition online. This practical approach provides online trainees with potentially effective skill-based practices beyond merely migrating the pedagogy to the online environment, thus aiding them in designing a course that prompts students to learn to consider audience, purpose, medium, and software when composing rhetorically effective multimodal texts, including ePortfolios. The intention is to help trainers construct training that genuinely assists new teachers of multimodal composition with the literacy needs that are particular to teaching in online settings.